

#DIY



BY JOAN WESTENBERG

JOAN WESTENBERG

#DIY

*F**k the gatekeepers.*

self.

First published by Studio Self 2021

Copyright © 2021 by Joan Westenberg

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

Joan Westenberg asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

Joan Westenberg has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet Websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such Websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Designations used by companies to distinguish their products are often claimed as trademarks. All brand names and product names used in this book and on its cover are trade names, service marks, trademarks and registered trademarks of their respective owners. The publishers and the book are not associated with any product or vendor mentioned in this book. None of the companies referenced within the book have endorsed the book.

Second edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

Find out more at reedsy.com

Dedicated to Cassie. For making sure I never have to do it by myself.

“Luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.”

- Lucius Annaeus Seneca

Contents

<i>Foreword</i>	iii
1 Get in the van.	1
2 You don't need permission.	10
3 Be prepared to make a certain number of sacrifices.	17
4 Don't. Burn. Out.	23
5 Be okay with getting it wrong.	30
6 Don't stick to anyone else's limits.	36
7 There are no shortcuts.	41
8 Follow your dreams. Unless your dreams suck.	44
9 The greatest tragedy is when you don't try.	50
10 The time to start is now.	54
11 Working for yourself isn't freedom. But it is the next best...	58
12 How to make something people give a shit about	64
13 You are your brand.	71
14 The score takes care of itself.	75
15 Staying hungry.	80
16 Whole-ass one thing.	83
17 Dedicate one hour each day to your craft.	88
18 Nothing is impossible if you know how to start.	94
19 Don't grow.	102
20 Just show up.	107
21 Make them pay what you're worth	110

22	Tell people what you want. Then let them help you.	120
23	It only looks perfect to you.	123
24	Whatever you make? Go for simplicity.	126
25	No matter what you do, someone will hate you.	131
26	The hard truth.	137
	<i>About the Author</i>	142

Foreword

When I was a kid, I was certain that my life would go on a set, clear path. I was sure that my life was going to look a certain way, feel a certain way. I was going to be a rockstar and a billionaire before I was 30.

When I was a kid, I had no idea how the world worked and what made it tick. Looking back now, I don't see myself as being naive; I don't see myself as being a clueless dreamer. I see a kid who had a lot to learn and didn't yet realize that the only way to learn it was by jumping into the wilderness and letting life happen, time and time again, with an open mind and a willingness to get the s**t kicked out of him.

I've been on a journey, ever since then, ever since I was 18. Ever since I walked off a job on the grill at McDonald's and started my first company, a venture that would one day end in total failure. Ever since I transitioned and became a transgender woman in tech, fighting to take up space and build my own company, ever since I became a writer and pitched to silence a thousand times on my way to being published in Wired, I've been on a journey to uncover what makes me who I am and what makes failure so integral to my own personality and growth.

Today, I run a tiny venture and creative firm called Studio Self.

We work with and invest in technology companies, and we do PR, branding, messaging and comms work. I love every minute of it. It's a project I built from nothing, I built it to stay small, and I built it my own way. I'm an angel investor, a creative, an activist, and above all - I'm a survivor. And I didn't get here by waiting for permission, following the accepted path, or waiting for a handout. That's not my style.

I'm fortunate to be where I am - lucky, happy, fulfilled and content. I don't think I'd feel that way if I followed the rules, living and working the way we're all expected to. I've been on a journey, and I know what it's like when you bow to the pressures of the world around you, give in to overwork, break down, crash and burn.

A part of that journey has constantly been writing every single day. Writing has helped me to translate the lessons I've learned about myself, about success, about entrepreneurship and about people and how they fail and get back up again. About how to measure what feels right and what feels wrong and make a call one way or another.

A part of that journey has been learning to help the people who read my work—the people who are struggling with their own problems and their own challenges. I hope this book is another way for me to do that. 🍷

1

Get in the van.

I think some people are still waiting for the world to be handed to them. They want to be discovered, want to be an overnight success, want some company or some celebrity to come down from the mountain top, and give them a free ticket.

It's about waiting for gatekeepers to give them permission to make, build, create and dream. And I know exactly where that comes from. It's the story we're sold. You become a viral celebrity, and you get signed by some company that gives you your own show. It's the same story we get sold repeatedly about lucky people being given their lucky break.

And you know what the story is intended to do? Help the powerful stay powerful. Help the rich stay rich. Keep you grateful and controlled.

If you're waiting for permission and a handout and waiting for the golden people to let you in, it just perpetuates the idea that people should be allowed to keep controlling access to freedom and creativity and entrepreneurship making. That kind of thing serves the corporations and the curators pretty well. It lets them keep playing a massive part in the supply chain. It lets them keep owning what we consume and when we consume it. It lets them own the narrative. It lets them own everything. It lets them own you.

What's the alternative? Go indie. Stay indie. Don't give in.

I don't see a reason to wait for permission. Permission isn't coming. Nobody is going to turn around and say, "*You know what? Now, you're allowed to build that software. Now, you're allowed to make what you want to make. Now, you're allowed to be who you are inside.*" I think we spend so much time waiting for permission because it's what we've been trained to do. When we want to start something new or live out our truth, we look for the gatekeeper. We're used to hall passes, time outs and parental/societal safety nets, and that's what we're waiting for now.

The truth is, nobody gives a damn if you're holding back. Nobody cares if you're trying to be someone you're not, nobody cares if your ideas never turn into reality, nobody cares if you have a

notebook full of incredible concepts, nobody cares if you have the potential to change the world. Nobody gives a good Goddamn enough to turn around and permit you to let all of that out. The only way to make them care is to decide that the permission doesn't matter, and you're going to do it all anyway, and if they hate it, love it, or react with complete indifference, at least you'll know. At least you won't be waiting anymore.

There's a lot I would have done differently if I'd listened to this advice.

I've I've messed up so many times; I deserve a medal. And worse than that? I didn't take the shots, and the time I wasted because I was waiting for someone to fire that starting pistol, waiting for someone to sign my hall pass, waiting for someone to give me the signal, waiting for the **Yes**, instead of fighting the **No**.

I don't spend my life thinking about that crap now. But it's there, in the back of my mind, as a timely prompt to make the world happen on my terms.

There's so much that can be done and so much that can be built, and we're living in a world of possibility. The potential for whatever we do is unmistakably huge. But that potential is proportionate to the risk, and the risk is not going away, even if you did chase down that permission.

If you want to build a community of people through your content, you need to rip the band-aid off and just get it done. Don't keep looking for validation; validate it. The same goes for building software, making zines, recording a podcast, launching a book,

writing an app, whatever the hell it is you want to do. The permission isn't coming. It's just you.

What are you going to do about it?

I'm a huge fan of Do-It-Yourself creativity. That DIY ethic, for me, comes from punk rock. I grew up on that music; I grew up on bands like Fugazi, who were so set on running their record label business and their band and their tours on their own without the help of a big corporation backing them. That was hugely inspiring to me, and it still is. I love the idea of "**Get in the van**" entrepreneurship, where you don't wait for gatekeepers, and you don't wait for permission — you get out there and do what you want to do. It's why I'm passionate about Web3. It's why I'm passionate about NFTs. This is a pathway that unlocks and enables limitless indie creativity and financial freedom.

It's scary, but it's rewarding, and it lets you embrace true independence. Being indie may not make you as rich as going the traditional route, but it sure as hell feels nice to be a little bit rebellious from time to time. Maybe 20, 30 years ago, it was a lot harder, too. It was harder to make your dreams happen, whether your dream was to start a record label, band, software company, or design firm. It cost me; it was harder to manage. We're living now in the age of opportunity for people who want to go it on their own, go indie, go punk rock, stick a middle finger to the mainstream and live by their own set of rules.

We've got the power to create and sell products over the internet instantly to people all over the world. That would have been almost inconceivable when the original D-I-Y-ers were record-

ing cassette tapes to sell out of the back of their car. Living by your own rules is possible, believe me. And it's the only way to ensure that you're living the way you want.

If you want to live by your own rules, you've got to create your own standards.

You are going to be rejecting what everybody else tells you success looks like. And you're going to be redefining it for yourself. Maybe for you, success doesn't look like getting investment from a VC firm and trying to grow to a billion dollars. Maybe success for you means doing a**load of client work to fund your business.

Maybe in your personal life, success doesn't look like a home loan and a mortgage that will set you paying off debt for the next 30 years of your life with no option to move or experience the rest of the world, maybe for you, success looks like the freedom to live and work wherever the hell you want.

That's okay. All of the old rules that people have told you from day one don't have to apply. It really is okay to walk out on those rules and those standards of success and define your own. As long as you know what it'll look like when you win — that's what matters.

The people who wait for permission are the people history forgets. Think about that for a moment. When you're always waiting for someone to come and open the door for you, why would anyone remember you?

The people who change the world don't wait. They break down the door.

We are programmed to wait for the gatekeepers because the gatekeepers have the power and maintain it.

Let me break it down for you.

Who benefits from you thinking that a VC fund is the only way to raise a startup?

Spoiler alert. It ain't you.

Who benefits from believing you need to find a record deal to make it as an artist?

Spoiler alert. It ain't you.

Who benefits from your understanding that you need to apply for 1,000 jobs, and you're lucky if they pick you?

Spoiler alert. It ain't you.

Who benefits from the total lie that you can't make it on your own and your own steam?

Spoiler alert. It ain't you.

Just because the system has been designed to keep masses of people, creative and driven people, genius people, waiting behind a locked door for someone to come along and judge them based on bulls**t and maybe open it if they're deemed worthy, doesn't mean we have to play that game. We are living right now in a time where tech, communication and mass media have been democratized in a way that has never before happened. It's not perfect, it's a long way from where we want it to be, but the world is opening up to indie entrepreneurs who want to do their own thing.

In the past, that was almost not an option. For the Beatles, it wasn't an option to bootstrap an indie band. They still made it out to Hamburg on their dime and played every show they could, racking up hours and hours of experience and spreading the word with the only tools and platforms they had. For Steve Jobs, it wasn't possible to crowdfund a computer. But he and Woz still bought the parts, put them together, and created Apple in a garage with a soldering iron and many crappy computer bits and wooden panelling.

For so many of the people we look up to and admire, it was barely even a path that was open to them.

And then everything changed.

Now, we have the boundless power of what your Dad used to call The Information Superhighway (cringe). That power has been expanded by platforms specifically designed to allow us to

create our own map of our own wilderness. Spotify, Bandcamp, Soundcloud, Eventbrite are the pathway for musicians who don't want to wait for underpaid and overworked staff at a dying record label to magically "discover" them.

Medium, YouTube, Tik Tok, Dribbble, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Adobe Creative Cloud as an entire platform, are the pathway for bloggers, vloggers and creatives who don't want to go a traditional route as authors or filmmakers.

Patreons, crowdfunding, and unlimited access to every Angel investor on the planet are the pathway for tech founders and entrepreneurs who don't want to wait for the crumbs from VC funds, some of whom are so out of touch they backed Juicero. Yet, they still act like they're the scions of Nostradamus himself and can pick every winner...

Every one of those platforms is groundbreaking because it represents a complete break with gatekeeper culture.

And every one of those platforms is open to you. Right now. Every one of those platforms is a tool that you can literally use today to break into the world you want to rule, the world in which you want to stake your claim. At this point, when I meet people who have taken stewardship of a massive, earth-shaking dream, and they tell me they're waiting for permission, I walk away. Because I can't help them, I can't help them make it happen if their entire plan is for someone to help them make it happen.

But if you accept that the door these gatekeepers are so carefully

guarding is literally just a crumbling old archway with no walls on either side, and if you can pick up your s**t and walk around it, believe me — there's a world out there, and you now have access to it. Stop waiting for permission to be who you and do what you want. Treat every opportunity like you're storming the castle and kick down that door.

Get your laptop.

Get your smartphone.

Get a Glitch account.

Get a Github repository.

Get a Soundcloud.

Get a sharpie.

...and Get in the van.

2

You don't need permission.

The world used to be run by gatekeepers. When I look at the music industry, in particular, that's the way it was built around record labels, management companies, booking agents, and so on, all the people from whom you had to get a Yes before you could **Make It**.

But that's a dumb system. Because it means that a select group of people get to be the ones who decide what's good for the rest of us and who can and can't create their passionate work, that's not the way the world needs to or should be. That's not the way we have to work.

Today, we can do pretty much anything, from starting a company to launching a black metal album, without anybody telling us no. And that's a wonderful thing. We aren't beholden to someone else's tastes, or comfort levels or desires. We can set out a vision for what we create and then put it out into the world in our own way. By minting our own creations, forging provenance on an immutable public ledger, creating

DAOs instead of startups, and trading our own work on our own terms, we can flip the script on decades of corporate gatekeeping and exploitation.

New York Times bestselling author Eva Lesko talks about writing and creating a world where gatekeeper permission was seen as the only path.

“Some people will waste a lifetime waiting for the Gatekeepers. I was almost one of those people. By nature, I’m a rule follower. Even unwritten rules. If there’s a way something is “supposed to be done,” that’s how I’ll do it. When I finished writing my first novel, I queried agents. This was the way it was “supposed to be done.” And, since I had traditionally published aspirations, I didn’t give it a second thought. That second thought didn’t muscle its way in for years. That’s because I typically espouse a “never give up” philosophy. I also clung to “If you don’t believe in yourself, no one will” through 81 rejections. But my belief in myself wasn’t exactly convincing the Gatekeepers. The options were clear: move on, or self-publish.”

For too many creatives, that’s the way their careers are presented. Their only way forward is to wait for someone to allow them to follow their passion, waiting for someone to bet on them and back them. That obsession with permission holds us back, and it prevents us from taking the leap we need to make it on our own. And waiting for permission opens us to rejection, just as it did for Eva.

There's nothing more depressing than rejection.

I've had so many rejection letters. From companies like Apple and Microsoft, even Buffer and Atlassian, and a bunch of Aussie VC firms. From record labels like Sony, EMI, Victory, Dischord, and Fat Wreck Chords. From publishers, from agents, from art galleries. From DC Comics and Marvel. From Twitter, Facebook, Google, Instagram, LinkedIn, from MySpace back in the day, and from TIME magazine - years before they approached me to write for their online platform.

Those rejections don't mean s**t to me now.

They don't mean s**t to me, from my vantage point as an indie author, artist, creator, coder, musician, and maker whose work exists and thrives on-chain.

Author Sigrid Nunez talks about the discouragement that rejection brings.

“Rejection is an enormous part of a writer’s life. It’s just the way it is. There are so many people out there wanting to show and sell their work. It’s easy to get lost and very difficult to get attention. As you would expect, I found it very discouraging, but I was also prepared for it because I knew writers. I knew what life was like, and I knew that the only thing that you could do if you really wanted to do this if you really wanted this life, you had to accept that it came with a certain amount of rejection. And if you kept at it, that could change. Your other option was to quit and say, I can’t take all this rejection.”

Every single one of my rejections hit me like a metric tonne of

bricks. I felt like I was a failure in every instance. And you know what? I probably sat down in the shower, drinking Budweiser and listening to Tom Waits, because I have a glorious track record of being really s**t at positively handling emotional letdowns.

And because I used to be an alcoholic.

But I digress.

When I set myself up to receive those rejections, by relying on the gatekeepers to tell me whether or not I had their permission to be somebody and do something, I was committing myself to the possibility of feeling like absolute s**t.

I try never to rely on gatekeepers anymore. I don't pin my hopes on them. I want them to help me out, sure — I want the opportunities they can give me. But there's no way I want to make their permission the be-all and end-all.

That's why I don't just chase publishing opportunities. I get out and make publishing opportunities.

That's why I don't just wait for people to let me speak. I make my own opportunities by booking a room and telling people to come and hear me talk.

That's why I don't pitch investors. If I want to do something, I will find a way to fund it myself so that the only person I have to rely on to say Yes is me.

That's why I live by a simple motto. Just. fking. Mint. It.**

The odds are, I wouldn't have a shot at getting backed by institutional investors right now. I'm a trans woman in tech. I don't get a look in, let alone support from the traditional VC or angel incumbents. I go it alone by choice, but I know there's an edge of necessity to it as well.

Those ways of avoiding the gatekeeper are possible because I have the online tools necessary to communicate with anyone and everyone at any given time. I don't totally reject the outside assistance of the people who can help me, but I also don't rely on it entirely and sit around wishing I had someone tell me Yes. I'm permitting myself every day to get out there and get it done.

Passing on the responsibility to a gatekeeper is an excuse not to own that responsibility yourself.

You know that inner voice that says, **well, you tried, and you blew it, so now we've got a valid reason to stop trying?** That voice is encouraged when gatekeepers tell you No. It's encouraged when you've given other people the authority to tell you what you can and can't do or chase or follow or work on. If you pass on that authority, you say to yourself that it's out of your hands, and you give yourself a reason to stop trying. Because hey, you did try — you asked someone for permission, and they said no. But here's the rub. That's not trying. It's looking for a reason not to be responsible for your own s**t. It's looking for a reason not to be responsible for putting in the hard work and driving at it until you move the needle.

People enjoy saying No because they're used to it, and it's easy.

It's always easier for people to tell you No than it is for them to say Yes. A No means they don't have to do any work, and you'll buzz right off and leave 'em alone. A Yes means they've committed to something. You try giving a busy person that choice, and tell me which option you'd bet your money on.

No comes easy to folks because we grow up hearing it all the time. How many parents say Yes to their kids, even half as often as they say No? How many parents open possibilities up instead of closing options off? How many times are we told **You Can't Do That** and left to figure out what we can do on our own?

When you add it all up, you start to understand that the gatekeepers we rely on are far more likely to tell us No than they are to say Yes, no matter how hard we've worked or how much we think we've stacked the odds in our favor. The good news is if you're used to hearing no, it can become fuel to create your own work.

Henry Rollins said,

“We all learn lessons in life. Some stick, some don't. I have always learned more from rejection and failure than from acceptance and success.”

Learning from rejection is the key part of failure, but it's also a key part of the DIY approach. Learning from rejection shows you how you fail to fit into the mold and how you can break out

#DIY

of it to form your own tribe, your own movement, and your own philosophy.

3

Be prepared to make a certain number of sacrifices.

I love 2 minute Ramen noodles. I've lived on them for 6 months at a time. They're not exactly healthy, but they tick every box a creative person needs. Cheap, long-lasting, easy to make, easy to customize, hot enough to warm your belly when you can't pay for the heating bill, and easy to eat. You can make 'em pretty much anywhere.

I've made them in shared houses, in the back of a van in a kettle plugged into a cigarette lighter, and in the kitchen of our heritage-listed office at Flare, just after we'd raised \$21m. I've eaten them in a dive hotel, and co-working spaces, and my friends' living rooms while we hacked our way to our products. They've powered every breakthrough I've ever had.

I haven't always had enough cash to eat well. I haven't always had the luxury of spending my dollars or my time on the kind of food that looks good on Instagram. That would have been a luxury, far out of my reach.

When you're a full-time musician, when you're on tour, when you're a struggling designer, when you're starting a company with nothing but a credit card and the shirt off your back, you'd be surprised how incredible 2 minute Ramen noodles are. They'll warm you and taste good doing it.

Are they great for your health? Absolutely not. But they won't kill you.

Ask anyone who's ever had to struggle for their passion, and they'll probably tell you the same thing. Those little noodles saved their life. Or at least, they saved their projects and their startups. They gave them just the right amount of sustenance at just the right time.

At the end of it all, I still eat 'em all the time. They're my go-to comfort food these days, even though I can afford a lot better.

For me, they remind me of what it means to battle against the odds and give everything you've got. They remind me of how it feels to put your st on the line when you know you might lose. It reminds me of how it feels to make a sacrifice for what you want.**

I'm not an all-or-nothing kind of girl; I'm not advocating for anyone to sacrifice everything and just quit their job. In fact, I'm a big believer in building side projects and small businesses and juggling a career the way I do it — building small passion companies and products, working for tech companies, and seeing myself as a weird combination of artist, entrepreneur, and professional.

So I'm not saying that you have to be low on cash, or you have to eat cheap noodles to validate yourself as an artist or an entrepreneur; what I am saying is that you have to be prepared to put yourself out there and make some sacrifices if you want to do what you love.

You've got to make hard choices, even ones that impact the way you live and impact your lifestyle and stop you from living as comfortably as your peers. When each of those choices is the difference between living it up in comfort and never exploring your passions or surviving for a while on 2-minute noodles — those noodles ain't bad.

It comes down to sacrifice. It comes down to what you're willing to sacrifice to win. I know one investor who refuses to put any money into a startup if its founding team hasn't fronted at least \$5,000 of their own cash into it. Because he won't give money to people who aren't sacrificing something to make their company happen, and when I look back on the time I spent in the music industry, I can feel the truth of that. The bands whose parents bought them top-notch amplifiers and guitars didn't have the drive of the bands who had to scratch and save to get their gear together, held in place with duct tape and a dream.

Sacrificing shows that you're committed. Giving something up shows that you care enough to put yourself into your startup or your product.

You have to give up something if you want to get anything.

I talk to a lot of entrepreneurs. People often want my advice or help. They come to me when they struggle with their growth, plans, or decisions, and I talk to as many as possible. I often notice a theme, though. People who come to me know exactly what they should be doing. They're not stupid, and they're not blind.

The problem is, what they should be doing is hard. And because it's hard because there are some considerable trade-offs, they want someone else to do one of 2 things:

1. Tell them there's another, easier path to follow.
2. Make them do the hard stuff that they can't make themselves do.#

But I always come back to one point that has to be made. If they weren't giving up something, would what they achieve really be worth anything to them if they weren't making that trade-off?

It's like winning the lottery. There are so many stories of people who've won the lottery and had millions of dollars dropped in their laps, only to piss it all away in a matter of a few years. And I think it's generally because they didn't value that money. They didn't struggle for it. They didn't give up anything to get it. So to them, it didn't mean all that much.

If you've given up something to reach your dreams, you're going to appreciate every success more. And feel every failure more,

too — but with the added knowledge that you gave what you had and gave it your best shot.

Life is about compromising, trading, and striking deals. That's inescapable, no matter how simply you live or how pure your motivations are. Everyone is trading something to get what they want.

When you first think about that, it seems cynical and dark almost. But I don't see it that way. I see it as a part of being human, recognizing that we can't just want, and having our wants become a reality. We have to give up some of what we've got to get more, whether what we're seeking is money, power, or just someone to love.

And I think that it's vital to remember — making that trade-off, giving up something of value to you, that's a key part of achieving anything. You don't get to have it all. You have to know what you're willing to give.

There's a symbolism to those noodles. It's symbolic because so many of us who do creative work had gone through our own ramen days when those cheap-ass noodles were all we could afford. I mean, hell, it's so universal that there used to be a record label back in the day called Fueled By Ramen.

I think you've got to ask yourself, do you believe in or love what you're doing enough to eat microwaved noodles for as long as it takes while you make it happen?

DIY is about making sacrifices. But don't worry. That's just

#DIY

life.

4

Don't. Burn. Out.

Where did this come from? When did we all start believing that overwork is the way of success, that anything less than being pushed to the edge of what is personally possible equates to not even trying?

It's widely accepted in today's world, and it's just unhealthy. I'm going to tell you something that I know to be true. Hustle is important, but the hustle isn't worth s**t if the hustler has collapsed from exhaustion. I've seen that time and time again from young founders and seasoned entrepreneurs who have bought into the hustle-as-existence mentality.

These are the folks working 12 hour days, 7 days a week, grinding it out to make their creative careers happen, losing a little bit of themselves with every passing second. They're minting all day, every day. They're staying up until 3 am on the regular, trying to get in on a whitelist. They're on their phones constantly FOMOing into everything and anything.

If they do that, the accepted truth is that if they punish and push themselves to the absolute max, the universe will reward them with success, and that's bulls**t.

Do you know what's actually going to happen?

They'll fall apart. They'll become just another series of burned-out wrecks on the way to the top. We'll all pass them and shake our heads sadly and say, what could have been?

The endless all-nighters aren't going to tip the scales in their favor. The endless 5 starts aren't going to make them a well-oiled machine. And no matter how many times they tweet about being better than the rest of us, it won't make their lifestyle any more appealing.

Designer Scott Berkun talks about the un-glamorous nature of burnout.

“Burnout means you’ve pushed your creative energy beyond the point of recovery. Like a well of water, creative energy replenishes itself slowly over time. A person who has pushed their creativity well too hard for too long will, like its watery counterpart, one day find it empty. Usually, by the time you notice something is seriously wrong, there’s little energy left to work with.”

When you're on empty, there's nowhere else to go. There's nowhere to turn to. There's no backup plan for running yourself completely dry, and there's no life hack that's going to solve it. The way we idolize burnout levels of input and output is incredibly harmful. It's impossible to do great work, to build

your own career, and to do it your own way when you're running on fumes – or worse, checking yourself into rehab.

You are not Superman.

I always hated the Superman comics. They felt pointless because the character was so overpowered and awesome that to make the story worth anything, the writers had to ignore his invincibility or conveniently forget the basic rules of his universe. That perfection isn't something that you have. It's not something you are ever going to have. If we're talking life goals, you'd be better off basing yourself on Lex Luthor than Superman because anything else is just unhinged.

You aren't Superman, and pretending you are will damage you in more ways than one. It's vital for an entrepreneur to be aware of her limitations and remain in touch with her vulnerability. At the very least, the physical ones.

If you let yourself believe you're invincible, that way lies madness. And hubris. And just generally winding up being kind of a tool.

Your body is going to betray you.

This applies no matter how many smoothies you drink or how often you “crush it” at the gym. Your body will fail you if you push and push it too far. Your body will quit. It will walk out on you. Overwork is not something that you can do without consequences. A lack of sleep, an overload of stress, even too much time spent staring at a screen — sooner or later, you'll be

on edge, and it won't take much to push you over it.

I've worked a lot of all-nighters, drinking Red Bull and popping caffeine pills like Tic-Tacs, and my body has never let me forget it. Okay, I'm going to be a little more honest with you. I've worked a lot of sessions doing coke in a recording studio, in a co-working space and a multi-million dollar office, and it pushed me to the edge. Don't be like that. You'll never achieve anything if you're in hospital with a breakdown.

You can't enjoy anything if you don't take the time for it.

Where are you really going? Where are you trying to end up? Because wherever it is, if you want to enjoy that, if you want to actually experience it, you need to slow the hell down. You're not going to enjoy your coveted success if you're an emotional, physical and spiritual mess. No level of success is worth trading your body, your heart or your soul for. No level of success is worth dying the slow death of unconquerable overwork and stress, with no end in sight and no way to take back the years you've lost.

The next time someone tells you that to succeed in a startup or as a creative, you need to work 130 hour weeks or be at a desk on a Saturday afternoon, you can tell them to go f**k themselves.

And if they want to find out more, give them my email address, and I'll explain it to them with a bunch of colorful graphs that they'll understand. I'm not even kidding.

The fact is, being an entrepreneur and creative — these are awesome things to do. They contribute to my life in an incredibly positive way. But there's a lot of poison out there in the form of contagious and callously incorrect ideas.

The worst is the mythologized worship of overwork and hustle as God. I've watched some people I truly respected crumble underneath that pressure, with ideas I loved disappearing as collateral damage and with their personalities altered by a system-wide collapse. You know what? I'm done beating myself up about that. I'm done setting myself the goal of working out at 6 AM every Monday, missing the goal most of the time, and then feeling like I'm a failure for the rest of the week.

When the buck stops with you, when it's your responsibility — and your responsibility alone — you can feel like you're caught in a pressure cooker. I know we're all supposed to be 100% motivated 100% of the time. We're supposed to wake up, and check Instagram, and read a bunch of quotes and then spring out of bed, ready to rumble. But that's not reality.

The reality is, sometimes we're a great big collection of slobs. Sometimes we can put a human on the moon, sure, but other times we eat Oreos in bed, and we call in sick, and we do anything we can to avoid facing the work and the s**t that we don't want to do.

I've saved a quote by a gun writer named Bianca Bass, who I've grown to know and admire over the last few years. Some days you thrive, and others, you merely survive. Some days you want to lean in, and others, you want to lie the hell down. It's impossible to be everything for everyone. But if you treat yourself with a little more acceptance and understanding, you'll find you have so much more to give.

F**k yes. Sometimes, you have to say that it's okay not to be switched on. It's okay not to give 110% of yourself, and it's okay to not be up to doing something.

It doesn't make you a monster. It doesn't make you a bad person, or a failure, or anything else. Holding yourself to a standard that you can't bear to see fractured is a sure way to stumble, fall and stay down.

So here goes nothing.

I'm not the put-together person that a lot of my readers think. I TRY. But I fail a lot of the time, and I'm okay with that. I've eaten McDonald's twice this week already. I've slept through my workout alarm 3 days in a row. I've been putting off answering emails since last Friday.

But wait. There's more.

I still haven't got around to buying the writing app I want to use for my book, so I'm putting it together in Evernote because I don't want to go through the effort. I hate making my bed in the morning, and I maintain my daily journal 3 out of 7 days a week.

I'm behind on every art project I've ever made, and I can't be f**ked ironing out the bugs in my current solidity contract so it's going on ice.

All of that makes me a human. It certainly shows that I'm a woman who is full of imperfections. And that's totally fine by me. Many people are going to want me to be on top of everything, all the time, and to those people, I say this — I don't feel like it. I don't wanna. You can't make me.

So embrace the mess and the chaos, learn to let it go, and remember — motivation might be the creative's holy grail, but you're not a monster if you can't find it all the time.

Give your hustle a break. Don't sacrifice yourself on the altar of the grind.

5

Be okay with getting it wrong.

We suck at knowing what we want. If you ask most people what they really want out of life, the answer will be shaped far more by their perception of what they should want than the reality of their interests and desires.

We want what we're trained and conditioned to want. For some people, that's been two cars, two kids and a picket fence. For others, it's a career full of accolades and attention. Our parents program these wants into us unconsciously, and so do our friends, the media we consume, and our surroundings.

If you're told that you want to do X, Y and Z your whole life and never given the space to consider whether you actually wanted to do A, B and C — your path will seem to make sense. You think you know the kind of company you want to start, the kind of person you want to collaborate, date and marry, and the kind of job that will make you happy and lend your life a sense of purpose. You dive into these passions and pursuits with abandon, believing that the only way to know if it works is to give your all, to give

everything, to give without reserve.

But how often are we wrong? How often are our careers littered with jobs that we hated after just one week and felt trapped? How often do we get deep into a relationship with someone — who might be an entirely decent person — but who isn't the one we want to grow even a minute older with?

How often do we devote our most precious and guarded resources to companies, ideas, and products that won't, don't, or can't work, only to realize in hindsight that the real issue at the heart of it was that we weren't the right fit in the first place?

Psychologist William Berry talks about the trust bias that centers on ourselves.

“At this point, I imagine a collective sigh and thoughts along the lines of, “other people may not know what they want, but I do.” That is exactly my point. We all believe that. Just like most of us believe we are better than average (a statistical impossibility). The mind is designed to trust itself, but psychology time and time again proves it is unworthy of that reputation.”

David Cain, the author of Raptitude, says that knowing yourself means knowing your wants as much as your needs — and it can be a life's work.

“I am convinced that how happy a person becomes in life depends on how much time they spend learning what they want. Just to know what makes you glow inside is the work of a lifetime. Your real, heartfelt wants accumulate over the years as you stumble into new

experiences that electrify you.”

The shortcut here is to just keep trying. Repeatedly. Keep getting it wrong, keep failing the test, and keep making the wrong choice. Because every time you do so, you are unlocking a new piece of data that can help you understand what you don't want, and by comparison, what you do. It can become a process of elimination. The more you know about what you've tried, what works, and what doesn't, the more you can fill in the empty spaces. The closer you can get to knowing the right path.

Finding out the truth about who we are is what guides us. Finding out the truth depends on learning what doesn't work.

This is why I think making definitive choices in our teens is a harmful practice.

We raise kids to believe that their entire lives are completely dependent on the decisions they make in their late teens, how well they do in their high school classes, the grades they make that unlock particular academic or vocational career paths, the people they choose as partners. We make them believe that they need to make every decision, commit to it, and get it right.

When we look at the research about the stress levels in high school leavers, we're seeing heightened stress and anxiety that should scare the hell out of anyone concerned for the well being of entire generations.

From a study by the UNSW School of Education:

“A survey of Year 12 students from a range of schools in Sydney did not paint a happy picture of life for the students. Of the 722 students surveyed, 42% registered high-level anxiety symptoms, high enough to be of clinical concern. This proportion is nearly double the population norm and larger than [earlier studies](#). Of the total survey group, 16% of students reported extremely severe anxiety levels, while 37% registered above-average levels of stress. Stress, anxiety and pressure levels were highest amongst girls, and higher still in gifted girls.”

The problem is that we aren't allowing these kids to have the freedom and space they need to try a dozen things, screw up, and burn it all down when they need to. If you forgive a Robert Frost reference, when two paths converge in a wood, we tell them that picking the wrong one is the end of the damn world. They don't have the data to choose the path that's right for them because they aren't allowed to find out which paths are wrong. And that's a tragedy. It's a way to produce people who are dissatisfied with their lives and work, people who lack a sense of meaning.

My own experiences have taught me that failure is not only inevitable — it's vital.

I have walked down a dozen different paths.

I have written for music blogs and reviewed live shows, interviewing rock stars like Simple Plan and hanging out at shows with The Prodigy. I have flipped burgers and made coffees, had a record deal, and produced a multi-platinum album. I've been engaged and had my heart absolutely shattered. I've been an

alcoholic, and I've recovered. Today, I'm an openly transgender writer, author, founder, and investor. And I don't regret a single moment. I don't regret a single choice. I don't regret any of it because — I'm here.

And my experiences are not unique. Many of the people we look up to as sources of inspiration have found their direction only through a process of trial, error, and elimination. Often publicly, loudly, and unashamedly.

Reshma Saujani, founder and CEO of Girls Who Code, had a path without a clear linear plan. Speaking to The Atlantic, she talks about working the wrong job, following the wrong career path, and even failing in a political bid.

“I [worked] at a law firm and then in finance, at jobs that I hated that paid enough to pay off my loans and to help my parents with their mortgage. I was seriously depressed and miserable because I was not giving back to the world. The money wasn't making me happy, and I felt more and more beholden to it, more and more scared. And so I quit and ran for Congress. I lost that race, but I put so much personal savings into my race. I hadn't had a paycheck in eight months. I was broke. But I wasn't going back. No longer will I work in a job that I hate for a paycheck.”

If leading creatives, founders, writers, and makers can screw up, learn and grow — there's no reason the rest of us can't follow suit.

There is room to do everything wrong the first, second, and third time.

Nobody will get it all right, and even if they did — it wouldn't make them happy.

I don't think there is anything with having a past full of mistakes, as long as you've been able to learn from those mistakes with a bias for action.

If you courted, dated, married, and divorced the wrong human being, that doesn't chalk up to a point against you on the big scoreboard; it counts as a search filter, giving you more knowledge and insight into what you want — provided you actually listen.

6

Don't stick to anyone else's limits.

I don't know who said **you couldn't** for the first time in your life. It might have been your parents, or a teacher, or a well-meaning family friend.

But somewhere in your origin story, someone told you that you were too weak, you were too small, and you would never make it. Someone told you that you had limitations that you could not overcome. They told you that the dreams inside your mind and your heart and your soul were outside your reach.

Someone told you that you weren't meant to be a dancer. Or an artist.

A programmer, or a games developer, or a performer, or an activist.

A musician. An entrepreneur.

Someone told you that because they looked at you and they

didn't really see you.

They saw a mirror, and in that mirror, they saw who they wanted to be and who they became, who they thought they were and who they turned out to be.

They saw their own beliefs and preconceptions, and ideas about what life is and what's possible.

Maybe they wanted to protect you from the way their hearts broke when life didn't go their way. Maybe it was their love for you that made them do it.

Or maybe they just thought little girls should be ballerinas and little boys should be CEOs. For whatever reason...they tried to make you into them. They tried to force you into their form and shape and pattern, and when you didn't want to be that or do that, they pushed and pushed. They spent years pushing, and so did everyone else. All the people who told you not to follow your dreams, play it safe, never start your own business, not work for a startup, and not be a comic book artist.

And when you pushed back? They said you were going to fail. And you were going to be a loser. People do this s**t all the time. They try and drag you down, call you pathetic, predict your absolute destruction, belittle you, laugh at you, mock you. But you can use that to fuel what you do. You can use it to fuel and drive your ambition, make you work harder, make you try harder, make you run when your body aches, and work when your eyes are closing.

There is no greater motivating power than the burning need to prove those assholes wrong.

You will never reach a point in your life where people will stop telling you. No, and stop telling you about the failure you're going to crash headlong into. F**k them. It doesn't matter. You will never reach a point in your life where you have to believe them. You don't have to take it as gospel, just because someone's said "stop kidding yourself" or "I'm just trying to be realistic." You can still prove them wrong.

When people give you limitations, they're not unbreakable rules handed down from on high that you have to set up around yourself to stop you from living out loud. When people give you limitations, it's because they want you to have their limits. But they don't get to be the ones who decide what does and doesn't limit you. Some things will, sure. That's life. Those things can't be given to you by someone else.

When you take the No, and you take the limitation, and you turn it into fuel, it can drive you to the highest of heights.

When people told me I could never transition, it became fuel. When they told me I could never build a life as a trans person and be happy, it became fuel. When they told me I didn't stand a chance, it became fuel. And it got me here.

For all I know, you could change the world. For all I know, whoever is reading this right now could be a student who goes on to write a comic that changes my life one day.

For all I know, you could be the programmer who designs the operating system I use in 20 years.

You could design the shoes I wear, the glasses I buy, the car I drive.

You could write a book that will reshape my worldview. Or perform a dance that makes me break down and cry.

Who knows.

You get to make it happen. You get to do that work and accomplish those incredible things. You get to because you alone can say Yes. When I think about the people who have already changed the world, I don't think of them as demigods. They're human beings who were told **No** and looked right up at whoever said it and defied them. Human beings who were told they couldn't and went the hell out and did it anyway. I

sometimes think about the people who live in the hands of fate, who run to glory, who take a shot when they don't know what could happen.

The people who live, breathe and act with reckless abandon. There have been hundreds of thousands of these people. And there will be hundreds of thousands more.

People who listen to the limits and reject them.

People who defy what we think they can do.

People who defy what they're told they can do.

People who defy what's been written and write something completely new. People who do it themselves and do it their own way.

People like you.

7

There are no shortcuts.

I've read the same stuff as you. I've read the same articles that promised me success above all else, success guaranteed, success in 5–10 easy steps, lessons and lifehacks. I've read them all for the same reasons as you - because I felt lost and uncertain, and I needed something to guide me.

But they didn't make my life better, and they didn't make me better, and they didn't make me win. I spent years searching for the keys to success, believing that there were some set of secrets that could unlock the universe.

Those years were wasted. They're wasted because the keys to success don't exist. There's no formula for being a success, and chasing it is almost appallingly egotistical — we think that we deserve to be big, so there must be a way to get there.

When you're looking for the keys, you're looking to find a shortcut and a guarantee, an easy way, a foolproof method. A cheat code in the game of life. I missed out on so much in terms

of experiences and passions and moments of pure joy because all I wanted was to find a way to win.

You know what? I'll tell you, the best advice I've ever heard is the worst advice I've ever heard. It's the best because it's tried, true and useful, and it's the worst because it's tough to follow and we all know it already.

It's the advice my first mentor told me when I was too stubborn and arrogant to listen, and it's the advice your parents told you when you got your first job.

“You've got to put the work in because it's the only thing that pays off. It's the only way to get what you want.”

We're all told this, and we all try and ignore it because putting the work in sounds hard. And it sounds like it's going to take a long time. Well, both of those things are true. But they don't make the advice worth any less. Because the fact is, no matter how many blog posts you read that tell you Jack Dorsey's “keys to success”, the reality is, you aren't Jack Dorsey. And neither am I. And we shouldn't want to be.

The folks who last, the folks who build things they love, didn't have any keys. They turned up every day and did what needed to be done and got their s**t over the line. They hit record. They wrote the first line. They scripted that first scene. They crafted one line of code, and then another, and then another.

That's what made their creativity work. It sure as hell wasn't just “believing in themselves” or getting up early to go jogging. That

*s**t might not hurt, but it's not a magic bullet.*

If you try to avoid the work by looking for all of the “keys”, you’re only wasting time, procrastinating, and letting yourself down. And here’s the thing, I can’t guarantee that putting the work in will mean you’re going to succeed. But not putting the work in 100% does.

I don’t buy into the idea that working 70 hour weeks is the only path either. Overwork is a bad idea. Pushing yourself to death’s door is a bad idea. Believing that working harder instead of smarter is stupidity.

*But you do have to take the work seriously, and you do have to battle through it. There are no “keys to success” — it’s all bulls**t. You need to focus, you need to get your hands dirty, and you need to get it done.*

8

Follow your dreams. Unless your dreams suck.

I'm a big fan of dreams. I think that having something higher, something driving you, something you wake up wanting in the middle of the night gives you an incredibly powerful force.

My own dreams have always pushed me. I dreamed of being an entrepreneur, a designer, writer, musician, technology journalist, jogger, comic book author, and software developer.

They're what keep me going. Those ideas that I could achieve great things and tomorrow reach higher than I could today. Without my dreams, I don't know how I'd get out of bed in the morning.

But we get so many bulls**t pieces of advice. You have to give up your job to follow your dreams. You have to let go of money to follow your dreams. You can't let anything stand between you and those dreams.

I think following your dreams is always an easy thing to do. As long as you're staying realistic, you're not expecting the entire universe to bow to you, and you aren't allowing anyone else to set your standards.

Your dreams don't have to be big.

I don't think you need always to be focused on being the biggest, the best, the greatest, the hottest, or the fastest. Those accolades don't mean a whole lot in real terms. It's okay to have small dreams. Your dream could be to start a punk rock band or build a simple, lightweight note-taking app. It doesn't have to be about reaching billionaire status or playing to a packed-out stadium. It can be as small as you want.

The point isn't to have something huge that towers above you like an unattainable peak. If you're the kind of person who wants to chase big dreams, there's nothing wrong with that — but the size isn't important.

Your dreams need to matter — to you.

This is the only way to measure the worth of your dreams. By how much they matter to you: you and nobody else. If your dreams mean something, if they connect with you deep inside, if they make you feel excited to get out of bed, that's enough.

My Dad never understood what I wanted to do. My dreams of making music, starting my own business, writing comic books, learning to make software — none of that mattered to him. As far as he was concerned, I needed to be studying medicine, science

or law—no other option. Looking back, I'm glad I had enough arrogance and rebellion in me to let me buck against his opinion. To realise that my own dreams mattered to me, and it didn't mean s**t if he hated them.

There's no right way to follow a dream.

I'm not too fond of the idea that there's a wrong or a right way to follow your dreams. It is just not true. People will tell you that you can't follow your dreams of building a startup if you don't move to Silicon Valley. That you can't follow your dreams of being an artist if you're working in an office. None of this is accurate. The fact is, you can follow your dream from anywhere, through any means, and to any degree, and there is no wrong path. If you want to build a startup from Boston, Brazil or Bangkok, you do you.

If you want to hold down a job in insurance that lets you pay for petrol/food/Xbox games while you're writing your novel, you go right ahead and do you. As long as you're working on it, your dream it's OK.

Pretend the clock isn't ticking.

Ask yourself, what would you be doing if every clock in the world stopped ticking and you no longer felt that time was a precious commodity you were running out of? The biggest obstacle to anyone following a dream is that they can't commit to the time it will take. Do you know how long it took Will Allison to write *What You Have Left*? Seven years. And for an author, that's not even unusual. The way to measure the success of a business,

artwork or book has nothing to do with speed. It's about how well you tracked against your goals.

So set realistic ones. If you're aiming to publish your debut book, look at a 5-year time frame. If you want to grow your startup, look at around 36 months. Don't give in to the rush that happens when you can't block out the sound of the clock.

Don't be a d**k to yourself.

I used to wake up and sit in the shower every day, repeating to myself how much I sucked at everything because I wasn't achieving success. It was my daily mantra, sitting under the water and crying. I was such a dick. Treating myself in a way that I would never treat anyone else in the world, tearing myself down, being incredibly cruel. When you're following a dream, with your entire soul focused on it, it's so easy to give in to that kind of behavior.

But it doesn't help you get anywhere. You really have to treat yourself the same way you treat other people. With kindness, love and respect. If you don't, why would you ever be productive? If you had a boss who treated you like s**t, would you do good work for her? It's no different when that boss is you.

Don't give up.

My Mum works several jobs. She tutors kids, she's a lecturer, speaks at conferences, and is a busy woman. Mum even works Saturdays. But she still found the time to publish a textbook last month. It wasn't easy to get that time, but she carved it out and got it done.

That's what you have to do. Make those dreams of yours a priority, no matter how exhausted and drained and tired and over it you feel. Please sit down and work on 'em. Please do it for 10 minutes a day. Try and get it up to 15 minutes. Try and get it up to 30 minutes.

You know what, when I said there was no wrong way to follow a dream, that wasn't completely true. There is one wrong way. It's never actually working. Talking, thinking, dreaming, and never doing. It doesn't matter how busy you are or how hard it seems; you have to put in a fraction of your time every day.

Your dreams are the most personal, intimate aspect of your life. They're so unique to you, and they give you a power that nothing else ever could. They make it possible for you to climb mountains and ship code and record blisteringly fast drum tracks, and that's awesome. But your dreams are also incredibly vulnerable and sensitive. They can be torn down by your perceptions of what makes them valuable or worthwhile. They can be killed by being ignored. They can be damaged beyond repair by the laughter of other people, or they can wither when you hide them away.

You need to tend to your dreams. Take good care of them. Give

FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS. UNLESS YOUR DREAMS SUCK.

them room to grow. Protect them when needed, but jump at the opportunity to show them off to the world.

The greatest tragedy is when you don't try.

“Someday” is the saddest word — it might as well mean never.

I know that failure isn't a dirty word. In startup circles, I often get the feeling that it's almost admired. We want to see failures, failures who have turned their shortcomings into success down the line. That's why we idolise entrepreneurs who have truly screwed up, only to find a way to become winners in the third act.

I think it's clear that failure itself isn't a tragedy. When you fail at something, you don't even need to feel too s**tty about it. There's about a thousand quotes, platitudes and cliches about failure that you can fall back on to help you recover.

We've reached a point where many of us are learning that failing, falling, crashing and burning are all a part of any journey to accomplishing anything. That's good. I love it. I love that we've blown past some of the stigmas around making mistakes.

Because the real obstacle that stops us from moving forward has nothing to do with failure, the real hurdle that takes out most entrepreneurs, dreamers, founders, writers, game-changers, future Basketball superstars, would-be musicians, painters, rappers, runners, programmers, visionaries and potential astronauts has never been a failure. It's not even bothering to get off the couch and try.

I meet a lot of people doing what I do. About 20% of them are building companies, freelancing, or making money or achieving some level of success. Those people are incredibly inspiring to me, and they make my life so much more interesting because they have built some raw experience that I can use to teach them or learn from myself.

The other roughly 80% of people have written “start a business” or “write a book” on their to-do list and have never done it. It's been on the list for so long; there's almost zero chance they'll get around to it. They are everyone. They are everyone because they just haven't tried. They've decided that they will change their lives, and they think that decision is enough.

I wish that were the case. I wish I could say that intent is 9/10ths of the battle, but that's patently untrue. The intent is just raw material waiting for a catalyst. As long as you do not take action, you will not find that catalyst, and you will not achieve traction, and you will not become more than you are. Due to inertia or a perceived lack of time, energy or resources, or any other reason, I believe that not trying has prevented the world from hearing music more beautiful than we could imagine or dream of.

I believe that there are hundreds of visionaries and geniuses, somewhere out there, who didn't try — and because of it, humanity missed out on companies, products, ideas, innovations and theories that could have changed the way we live and breathe. I believe that artists could have created works of beauty so profound that they could bring politicians to tears — but they never tried.

I have intense FOMO when it comes to makers and builders. I don't want them to succumb to the modern human instinct of laziness and lethargy because if they do, I could miss out on the greatest companies and creations of all time. I'm selfish. I want nice things.

So sue me.

We've accepted that failure provides us with lessons. As long as you're living consciously and not running on autopilot with zero self-awareness, that's always going to be true. Inactivity, never trying, that doesn't teach you anything. You don't improve, you don't advance, you don't develop, and you sure as s**t don't win. If the worst happens, you learn some tough lessons; you have every reason to go for it. Sure, there are always other consequences that can be hard to face — I've lost money, lost clients, lost some self-respect, lost my way and lost my relationships due to starting and shutting down businesses — but you always get through them. You can always come out the other side.

I don't think people believe me when I tell them that I want everyone who reads this book to be more successful than me. I

want them to be huge. I want every single person to be wildly successful, fulfilled artists, talented novelists or millionaire entrepreneurs. I can't think of a better legacy to look back on. But it's never going to happen if you don't put on your game face and try.

10

The time to start is now.

People are pessimists. As a rule, we're all pretty negative, and we get off on thinking about how bad everything is and how much better it used to be. I'll bet it goes all the way back to a bunch of grunting cave people whining about how the Hunting/Gathering was better when their parents were younger.

Entrepreneurs, tech-types, and founders do it too. We talk about how much better it was to start companies back in the '70s, or the '80s, or the '90s when we could have been the founders of Apple or Microsoft. When there were so many things to discover and build. And we look at those companies with hushed awe like they're Gods.

It's all wrong.

I'm 100% sure that this is the best time in human history to be an entrepreneur, an artist, or a creative.

The blockchain has revolutionized everything.

For the first time, we have the ability to create completely independent, financially free creative and entrepreneurial careers that are not dependent on corporations. That new level of freedom has removed barriers of entry to makers throughout every single ecosystem.

And outside that immense revision of infrastructure, power imbalances and societal, cultural and technical debt, we are living in a time of tech accessibility and global connectivity that has never been seen before.

Affordability

Starting a project is dirt cheap. It really is. You can kick off a new online venture for less than \$100 easily. You can register a domain name, purchase hosting and web design through a drag and drop interface, and be up and running for a tiny initial outlay. That kind of approach could enable almost any model business, whether it's e-commerce or a service-based design firm.

Sure, you'll run into a lot more costs when you start looking at building software or platforms yourself; but validating the development cost won't cost you a thing with a launch page and a sign-up form. You're looking at \$15 a month.

Global teams

Finding a co-founder isn't the challenge it once was, either. Where meeting a business partner in the past could have been a lengthy process, searching out a face-to-face meeting, you can now discover talented individuals on the other side of the planet. Look at companies like Woothemes – their original team was separated by hundreds of miles back in the day.

You aren't limited by the people around you or your local technology or business environment. You have the ability to get out there and discover a genius who perfectly meshes with your approach to business, no matter where she is. If you need someone to climb that mountain with, she's out there.

When you have the entire population of the connected world at your fingertips, trust me — the hard part won't be finding the right co-founder; it'll be choosing which one.

Tools & platforms

From e-commerce plugins and solutions to 3D printing services, you can take care of just about everything your business needs from your smartphone or a browser tab. That's incredible. The apps, software, and platforms that are instantly available to us now would have been unimaginable in the past.

When I initially started in business as a freelance designer, my first expense was shelling hundreds of bucks for Adobe Photoshop and Corel Graphics Suite to have the bare minimum I needed to get the job done. Nowadays, with a simple subscrip-

tion that adds up to the price of a few cups of coffee, I have access to the entire collection of fully-featured Adobe apps. And some of the best tools out there right now are so easy to use. Canva. Squarespace. Hundreds more.

The only obstacle to getting s**t done is your own knowledge.

...And on that subject

You can learn anything right now. We have online courses, tutorials, academies, apps, and teachers who can provide you with the knowledge you need to learn coding or business development, or even hand lettering. If there's any knowledge you lack to start a business, that knowledge can be learned at minimal cost and from the warm comfort of your couch.

It's just putting in the work and the hours to absorb that knowledge and attain a level of engagement and familiarity. The material and the chance to get the technical education you'll need are out there right now.

Look at Code Academy or Udemy. Hell, you can find most of the basic knowledge you need to run your first start-up on Quora.

Working for yourself isn't freedom. But it is the next best thing...

Here's the hard truth. Working for yourself is not freedom. But it is the next best thing. Talking to some of the founders I've met over the past six months, I've encountered an overwhelming majority who want to found businesses to achieve freedom and a work-life balance. Their idea is that if they became their own boss, life would be a lot easier. It'd be simpler. It'd be more relaxing. I can see the appeal in this. It's a lifestyle that gets pushed around a lot by entrepreneurs who post photos on Instagram captioned "today's office" — and it's always a beach in Thailand.

In my experience, entrepreneurship is not like that. It's not an easy, free lifestyle. It's the furthest thing from being low pressure. And you do not give up having a total asshole for a boss. Just doesn't happen. Because working for yourself is the hardest career you could ever choose.

If you're successful and grow your business to the right size and

dedicate years of your life to slogging through the s**t, you can reach freedom and happiness. You can sit on a beach with your laptop and have a carefree life. But it takes a long time. And if you're building a startup because you want a work-life balance and total freedom and hours of R&R time, I have some bad news. You're not going to make it.

Let's start with the money.

When you work most other jobs, you work for a paycheck. You can sit down at the start of the month and write out a budget, everything you're going to do with your cash. You have a pretty decent idea of what you'll be paid, and you can make some decisions around that.

If you work **X** number of hours, you'll be paid **Y**. It's an easy equation. It's a million miles away from entrepreneurship. Because when you start your own business, and you're relying on it for your main source of income, that equation becomes a lot more complicated.

If you're bootstrapping, you're staring at a CRM, working out how much money is in the pipeline, which deals you can close, and what your business' cash flow looks like. You're matching that against your bottom line. And then you're trying to guess the safest amount that you can withdraw to pay for your lifestyle.

In the beginning, a bootstrapped startup lives hand-to-mouth. You have to be prepared to deal with that. This is tough because it means your lifestyle will be hard to plan, and your quality of living will rise and fall with your revenue. It's unavoidable. You

will need to start making good decisions about the money. At this point, you either begin to find ways to cut corners in your own life to fund your business or cut corners in your business to fund your life. The first option is the right one, but it's tough. The second option is the easy one. It will ruin you.

If you're a funded startup, it's a little different. You're not trying to scrape together enough money for your salary because you know where it's going to come from. What you are trying to do is give your business enough runway, and that's a whole other bucket of pain.

Side note. If you're running a startup that's taken on investors, you are no longer your own boss. You'll find that out when you start disagreeing with the money.

I know this sounds depressing. If you want to feel good, go right ahead and skip to the end of the chapter. I promise it's not all doom and gloom.

Okay, still with me? Let's talk about time. I hear from founders who want to tell me that they're chasing the dream of entrepreneurship because they want to take control of their time and have a lot more of it to spare. Again, I'm sorry, but that's not what starting a business is like.

For most people just getting a company off the ground, the number one resource you have is time. It's a risky asset because you never have as much as you think, and it can disappear tomorrow. But it's all you've got. In the first few years of your

business, you will sink hours and hours of your time into running your company.

When you take time away and try to switch off, you're going to be acutely aware of what isn't being done. Aware of the tasks that aren't being completed, the clients who aren't being called, and the products that aren't being refined. No matter how hard you try to shut your mind down, it will rarely happen.

Seriously, keep scrolling, and I'll make you feel better about your life choices. I'm almost done.

Haven't given up yet? Awesome. There's one more thing. That "be-your-own-boss" thing. If you think that being your own boss will be nicer than working for someone else, you will be sorely disappointed.

Everyone who's worked for someone else has encountered one of two types of bad bosses at some point in their lives.

1. The asshole boss. You know the kind. They wait by the elevator with a clipboard and mark the time you get into the office. They dump a bunch of papers on your desk at 5:00 on a Friday arvo. They don't give you a pay rise or a promotion, and they never remember your birthday.
2. The boss who doesn't give a s**t. They don't challenge you, they let you turn up late, they never give you quality feedback, and you never learn anything. Most of the time, you feel like they wouldn't particularly care if you came into work at all. Which, in turn, makes you feel like your job doesn't matter.

You're about to become one of those two types of bosses. When you work for yourself, there's no middle ground between them. You'll either give yourself way too much slack and never have any control, or you'll hound and pound yourself to the point of insanity.

You will learn to treat yourself in a way that you would never treat your staff. You will yell at yourself and criticise yourself to such an extreme that it would be grounds for a harassment lawsuit from anyone else.

It's not healthy, and it's not a good thing, but more than anyone else at your startup, you will be aware of the crushing pressure and the ticking clock and the need to stay afloat. The rest of the team? They're turning up to their jobs. You're putting your life on the line.

If you've battled through all that and you're still reading, congratulations. I have some good news for you. No matter how hard it is, being an entrepreneur is worth it. Founding your own business is worth it. Growing a startup is worth it. You have the opportunity to build something incredible, something unique that could only have come from you.

You have the opportunity to take ownership of your own career and take responsibility for your path. No amount of failure or hard work, or tough times can take that away from you. When you're making something for yourself—trust me, it feels a lot better than making it for someone else.

I've been on this ride for a long time, and I don't regret it. I could

do anything else, and I'd still choose to be an entrepreneur, to work every day trying to grow my businesses and build. If you go into entrepreneurship fully understanding that it's going to be difficult, that it's going to take years of your own time and a lot of late nights, that it's the hardest thing you'll ever do, you are going to be okay. You can embrace the tough parts of it and appreciate the good.

And maybe, just maybe, if you get far enough and you work hard enough, you can end up on a beach with a laptop, drinking cocktails and running your business the way you want.

But if you go in there thinking that you're about to get your dream lifestyle out of the gates and live free, there's a rude awakening around the corner.

12

How to make something people give a shit about

If you're any creative, you have to face the facts.

People don't give a s**t anymore, not the way they used to. People don't give a s**t about the work we do and why. They don't give a s**t about the effort that we put into our creativity, and they don't give a s**t about the products we make, the books we write, the songs we record, the companies we start or the stories we tell.

But why not? Why doesn't the world care? Where did the shift happen that turned creative people and entrepreneurs into just a whole lot of noise that the rest of the world wants to tune the hell out?

It happened as soon as the first website went online.

It happened as soon as the internet exploded and people realised that they could find a way to access every product and every piece

of work ever made for free. In an instant. Without having to search too hard or look too far.

Suddenly, creative work became the opposite of scarce. When can you download an Mp3 repeatedly, when you can access an infinite number of ebooks when you can get more immediate satisfaction from a bunch of blog posts that you can from a hardcover? Where do you value the stuff that you consume?

Think about the shift that happened 10, 15 years ago with Napster and Limewire and other peer to peer sharing platforms that let us suddenly open up the whole world of creative s**t to each other and bypass the gatekeeper without paying a cent.

Now think about how difficult that could be at times. Waiting for things to download, trying to find legitimate files, avoiding (or embracing) porn and dodging computer viruses.

We began to devalue the work we consumed. We did, way back then.

Well, look at where we're at now. We don't even have to download anything. We can pay \$11.99 a month for Netflix, \$11.99 a month for Spotify and get YouTube and Medium for free. Let me tell you something. When I was making a few hundred bucks a month working the counter at McDonald's, I spent \$10–30 a pop to buy a single CD or DVD. I can remember buying my first album took me half of a week's pay. Now a third of that cash would get me access to almost every album ever recorded. And when I pay my Spotify subscription, it's not one-tenth of my income. This is why people don't give a s**t. They

don't give a s**t because we have totally devalued the work and the products and the software and the talent that we used to invest in all the time. We've turned it into the equivalent of having a free beer tap in our kitchen, and it's no wonder we don't value a half-decent pint on the weekend anymore.

That's the state of affairs right now. That's where we've come. That's what every creative is facing right now when they ask that question, how can I make a career out of my passion? We have the challenge of making people give a s**t when they have very little reason to. We have the challenge of standing out enough to make them care about us, specifically when we're competing with this never-ending stream of stuff—low value, free stuff, stuff that we can pay a minuscule amount for.

And that's incredibly tough. But we can do it.

How to make something people give a s**t about.

You could make something right now. If you wanted to stop reading, grab a sheet of butcher's paper and brainstorm, you could probably come up with half a dozen ideas for apps, books or products. Ideas aren't the hard part, after all.

You could build a WordPress site and start harassing your friends to test the concept. You could start writing op-ed pieces on Medium and put "Founder" or "Author" in your Twitter bio within 48 hours. You could throw up a landing page, post the first chapter of a book and start pushing it on Product Hunt.

Where things get tough is when you're trying to make something

that people genuinely give a s**t about. You don't want your dream to die in the chamber because nobody read it, watched it, used it or listened to it. The Deafening silence surrounding your work can crush your soul.

You want people to care? Here's how.

If you want to make something that people really care about, that they actually give a hot s**t about, you have to care about it yourself.

Because if you don't, try as you might; it'll come out in the final product.

The reason for this?

Making something is hard. Making something you don't care about is even harder.

The only way you'll be able to consistently work when you don't want to work, consistently try when you don't want to try, is by deeply and honestly caring about your work.

You want people to care?

You have to care, yourself genuinely.

Make things for real people.

The best writing advice I have ever heard was to write specifically for someone I know. It's a genius idea. Every time I create something or build something, I think about who I know that would benefit from what I'm doing.

If you have something you care about enough to make, you have to ask the next question — who are you making it for? What information do they need? What turn of phrase would stop them in their tracks? What is their single pain point that the product could solve, or their secret story that your novel would be able to touch and cultivate into a real emotional response?

Stop thinking about your audience as a vague concept, a collection of faceless people.

Believe that your audience is a real person with feelings, experiences and a story. It will change your perspective.

You want people to care?

You have to know what will make them care.

Ask yourself if you fit the project.

You need to ask yourself whether you have the courage, the strength, the motivation and the passion for making what you want to make. And I mean, really ask yourself - because when you first come up with an idea, you can get so caught up in it that you can't see anything else.

It's easy to mistake excitement for passion, motivation and ability.

When that feeling starts to die down, or you get used to it, you can realize that you don't have the real raw power to finish and follow through. That's not a bad thing; there is nothing wrong with recognising that a project isn't right for you. Maybe there's another project, that is.

It's not enough to care about what you're making.

You want people to care?

Only work on projects that feel right.

Don't Do Anything To Be Someone.

Have you ever watched one of those reality TV singing competitions? You've probably seen a hundred young kids, eyes shining, clutching microphones and talking about their dreams. They'll explain that ever since they were kids, they wanted to be singers.

They hardly ever say they wanted to sing.

When it comes down to it, half the time, it's because actually singing isn't the end goal. They want the trappings and lifestyle and the breaks of being a singer.

If the act of singing were really their end goal, they wouldn't be on a reality TV show. They'd be out there every night singing anywhere they could, writing songs, starting bands, recording

music.

The same is true for anything you could make. Do you want to make **X**, or do you want to be the person who made **X**? Because if you don't care about the act of making something, and if you don't want to get out there every day and try to make something, you might as well quit.

You want people to care?

You have to care first, and you have to care about your craft.

And one more thing. You've got to put in the hard work.

Suppose you want to write a book that can break someone's heart — put in the work. If you want to start a business that changes the world — put in the work.

If you want to draw a comic book that expresses everything you are and dream about — put in the work.

You want people to care? Put in the work.

You are your brand.

I think it's important to remember that every single action you take and every single word you say, online and offline, is a part of your brand. The way you are perceived comes down to the art and the expression behind your craft and creation, your ambitions and how you've communicated them. The shoes that you wear. The words that you write. The words that you choose not to write. There is no single part of you that can be separated from the brand that is you. If that sounds uncomfortable — I think that's understandable. It's the by-product of overexposure and connectivity.

But it's true, whether you like it or not. It's a part of the work that you do, and it's a part of the way people will perceive that work. You can't opt out of having a brand. It's not possible. You can't opt out of your brand playing a part in your life. Even Seneca accepted this, discussing how a stoic should present themselves outwardly to translate who they are inward.

This is something I have found difficult as a writer and as a

creative director. As an artist and designer. As a journalist and columnist. Because every single piece of me, while disparate and different and driven by competing passions, is still a working element in the brand that people associate with who I am. Seeking cohesion in that mix is not an easy task, and defining the brand that can explain who I am is a challenge I wrestle with daily.

Whatever you may be, and whoever you may be, your brand is the key to it. For an outsider, your brand explains the work you do and the way that gives that work meaning and direction. Your brand becomes almost the pitch that expresses the artist, the builder and the maker in you in a visual and spoken and contextual language that an audience can grapple with.

That's why it becomes so important. Without it, the perception of you becomes fragmented and uncontrolled and almost overwhelming.

You can't opt out of the associations that people are going to make.

You actually don't have the choice whether or not you engage in personal branding. Personal branding is going to happen to you and around you, no matter what you do. It feels almost pornographic in its insincerity to many of us. It feels as though we are selling our souls in the same marketplace as influencers who operate on a grift, or celebrities who sell skinny tea, or LinkedIn consultants who attempt to profit from human pain and misery with copied and pasted statuses. That's a fair point of view.

But you can transcend that if you are mindful of the brand, you encompass. If authenticity matters to you, you can make it a part of everything that you do. If quality matters to you, you can make it your DNA. If your craft or your politics, or your ideals are integral to you — they can be a foundation.

The important part is to take ownership of it.

Take control, take command, and make your brand a conscious move on your part that you can commit to long term and remain involved with. Examine who you are, not simply from where and how you perceive yourself, but from the perspective of the people around you. Are there words, actions and beliefs you didn't even know you were drawing to yourself and identifying with who you are?

If you can understand each of those threads, how your choices and your work shape that perception and who you have been and who you are when you communicate, you can define who you want to be and how you want to be recognised define those associations.

If you're starting from day one, if you're starting from zero, you're still not starting from a blank canvas.

You need to examine the content and the public persona you've already generated, whether it's from Tweeting and Snapchatting or just being associated with your past professional positions; there is context already out there that's a part of your existing brand.

Analyse it, question it and try to understand it. Speak to people who know you and get their take on what your brand is. You don't have to adopt that, you can choose to grow beyond it or shift it completely, but you do have to be able to see the baseline.

You are your brand. You have to take control of it. There's no way around that, and there's no way to avoid it.

The score takes care of itself.

Too often in our lives, we are faced with outcomes that are entirely outside of our control. We can't control the people we work with and for and the choices they make. We can't control the responses to our work, the words we write, and the things we express and share. We can't control the way people treat us and the way people answer us.

That lack of control is increasingly constricting and anxiety-producing. We have given up so much of our lives to technology, to the people we engage within our relationships — to give up more control feels like a sure way to lose ourselves and who we are.

Input vs. outcome

Our focus is almost purely on the outcomes of our lives. We obsess over those outcomes before we even begin creative or professional projects. We panic and worry about the reception to our work when that work is still in the theoretical stage — IE

before we've even tried.

That overemphasis on the outcome has a particularly negative impact — it denigrates work and removes any value it has on its own, divorced from how people perceive it. A piece of software does not derive its worth from how many users it has. Its worth depends on how it was made, how it runs, how clean and beautiful the code. Its worth is innate and inherent when its creator has invested themselves and a small piece of their heart into its inception.

In short, you don't have to sell it successfully for it to be good. It can be good purely by your investment of blood, sweat and tears. It can be good because it does what it is intended to do, and it does it well because you took the time to do it right.

The same is true of any other activity. It's the input that matters.

In the book *The Score Takes Care of Itself*, former SF 49ers coach Bill Walsh talks about the importance of every single action taken by every team member, from the groundskeepers to the athletes themselves.

“The culture precedes positive results. It doesn't get tacked on as an afterthought on your way to the victory stand. Champions behave like champions before they're champions; they have a winning standard of performance before they are winners.”

You can't set out to win. That's not a tangible goal that can be broken down and attempted. All you can do is identify each of the steps it takes to be a great writer, a great artist, a great founder

or a great investor, and take full, unflinching responsibility for those steps.

What is your responsibility?

Your responsibility lies in owning the things that must be done. You don't get to make excuses if you want to be good at something if you want to achieve something worth it.

The issues we can control are directly related to our actions and our words. I am not saying we shouldn't address the issues that cause us stress, pain or make us uncomfortable at work. Still, I do believe that for many people, addressing those issues through the filter of the outcome could lead to some very unproductive choices and a level of stress and helplessness we may not be comfortable with.

I've observed that the places where you can find clarity on this issue are most often related to your technical output. In other words, technical decisions. Often, this doesn't relate to what you create at all. It relates to what you make, what you say, what you write, what you share. It's about what you do.

When you use your work to express yourself, create, deliver, or share your vision, you are often confronted with the reality of the limitations of language and how the world presents your message to others. You have to own that. You can't blame someone else for it, and you can't shirk the responsibility you have to reach for the best version of it.

How do we make our input better?

Outcomes in life, work and love are often unpredictable. When we think about control, it's only natural to focus on the inputs, what we do, how we act, what we say, how we think, what we write, and even who we're with.

We find ourselves forced to focus only on the process. Do we speak as well as we should? Do we engage in the work in the best way we can? Is the work complete? Does the timing fit what we expect? When our input is ignored, when the outcome is far from the way we expect it to be, it can be terribly frustrating. But it's not the end of the world. We can still find pride in knowing we made what we set out to make.

This is an opportunity for feedback and reevaluation. If we can learn to separate the outcome from our input, we can go back to our next task with more confidence, more creativity and increased awareness of what went wrong.

I've been writing my blog since 2008, and as you can imagine, the majority of those contributions are now dormant. The moments I had spent preparing a post, researching a topic, crafting a message and drafting the words I'd written have mostly served to build a collection of rusted out graveyards littering the internet. And yet, I still believe I'm an author.

Why?

Because my input is there, my work is there. Writers write, and I write. I sit down with a notebook or a laptop every day, and I

put down a series of words in the order of my choosing, and I do it to the best of my abilities.

If people don't read it, I'm still a writer. If people ignore me, I'm still a writer. When all that matters is your input — and you manage that input with care — the outcome will either be there or it won't, but you've done everything in your power.

And the score will take care of itself.

Staying hungry.

The difference between winning and losing is how much you want it. And wanting it bad enough doesn't mean you'll automatically make it. The most important part, if you're creative, if you're an entrepreneur, if you want to get into the ring and go a few rounds with fate, is staying hungry.

The people who change the world stay hungry. They look at what they want to do, look at what they want to change, and don't resign themselves; they don't call it a day. They don't say they're satisfied.

Hunger is what drives you. The hunger is what makes you excited to wake up in the morning, and it's what gives you the power you need to keep gunning for your goals when you take a hit or you're reeling from a loss.

The hunger pushed Steve Jobs to get back in the game after he was ousted from Apple. The hunger is what makes me write 2,000 words every single day and lie awake with ideas and

concepts running through my head.

The hunger is what turns you into your own secret weapon. The hunger makes you want what other people tell you that you can't have. The hunger is your best friend, and your worst boss, and the kind of manager you'd hate if they were a real person.

The hunger is what challenges you, it's what makes your work better, and it's what makes you believe your work is the worst you've ever done, no matter how good it is.

I want you to stay hungry. I want you always to be focused on beating your own forecasts, your own expectations and your best track time. That's where creativity grows; it won't grow by stagnating. If you stand still, you'll never improve.

Work to improve your craft.

When I look at the artists I respect — like The Clash, like Sleater-Kinney, like Joan Didion, like Ian McKaye, like Patti Smith, like Fugazi, like Douglas Coupland — they had that hunger. It made them push the boundaries of their own art and try to turn it into something larger than life, larger than living, larger than them.

What else would turn a hardcore punk kid like Ian McKaye into one of the boldest and most inventive musicians and most authentic and down to earth business owners of our time?

Staying hungry doesn't mean relentlessly and ruthlessly pushing yourself to your physical and emotional limits and risking breakdown. That's never a good idea. You can't make anything

when you're too sick, too tired and too burned out to function. The myth of the artist living at the edge of their own capabilities and suffering through a total lack of self-care is utterly unhealthy.

Staying hungry doesn't mean you can't enjoy your success, take your foot off the gas when you need to and reserve your strength for the battles that matter. It simply means finding the drive to want more. To want to be more. Make more. Increase your skills, improve what you do and grow.

I don't think there's any chance of becoming what you have the potential to be if you don't stay hungry, folks. Suppose you don't keep on pushing the boundaries if you don't keep striving to be more than you are, more than you've been.

Stay hungry, folks. When that bell goes off, you'll be back in the ring going toe to toe with the champ, with your own limitations.

Whole-ass one thing.

I always used to ask myself, which dreams should I follow? Which ideas and concepts and burning desires should I make my life's work? That question kept me up at night. But it was always the wrong question...

The thing is, you can take on almost any challenge, and you can follow almost any dream. Even if it's in a small way, even if it's writing as a side project instead of becoming Stephen King, even if it's creating small pieces of useful software instead of revolutionising AI.

But what you can't do is follow everything, all at once. What you can't do is refuse to compromise when life gets in the way or when things don't pan out.

People often ask me, how did I know what I wanted to dedicate myself to? I didn't actually approach it that way at all.

I asked myself, what didn't I want to dedicate myself to?

What was I ready to let go of?

Just because you can chase a dream doesn't always mean you should.

And I'm not saying that because I want you to listen to the people who revel in telling you No. I'm saying it because if you really think about your dreams, you can often identify which ones you want to be chasing in 10 years, and which ones are just cool ideas that you think might be...you know, fun.

You have to come to terms with the notion that simply because you're excited about something doesn't mean that it's an idea or a dream you should pursue. Not unless it really aligns with who you are and what you want.

I realised that it was time to let go of being a musician when I knew that I didn't want to be getting up to go on tour every day for the next 20 years; it just wasn't a life I was happy with. That dream wasn't compatible with what I wanted out of my time on this great big spinning rock.

For some of my friends — it's exactly what they want. And that's great. It didn't align with me.

And in the end, we all have dreams that don't align with who we are. I had other dreams of being a stand-up comedian, a movie director, a breakdancer and — as a child — an elephant in the circus. None of that is what I really want to do, though. As exciting as being an elephant would've been.

People will search for what they're meant to do. What fate has in store for them? What the universe wants. But they won't find answers. People aren't meant to do things, and they aren't meant to follow certain dreams. We have to choose them, for better or worse, based on who we are and what the hell we really want.

We don't have all the time we think we have.

I know it feels like time is almost limitless, but trust me — it only feels like that until you've run out. It only feels like that until you've committed to so many dreams that you don't even have the time to hug your cat and spend a spare second with your loved ones.

And you can't divide the limited time you have between a thousand and one passions all at the same instant because not only will you never make progress with them — you won't give yourself the margin to enjoy any of them either!

This is what I know for sure:

- Think of it like this. Every moment you spend on one project is a moment you cannot spend on another. **Which moment is worth more to you?**
- Moving on from one dream to make another a reality isn't a failure, and it isn't giving up; it's **getting better at committing.**
- When people tell you no, it's not the same thing as telling yourself no. The first is control and a lack of faith; the second is discipline and **faith in yourself.**

- Interest is different from a passion, is different from an obsession, is different from a dream. **Only you can work out which is which.**
- There is no point at which you have failed at a dream, **as long as you have spent energy and time to follow it.**
- Your dreams are supposed to be enjoyed, not blasted through at the speed of light, and if you don't stop to enjoy 'em, **when you reach where you wanted to be, it will only feel empty.**
- Nothing matters more than what you wanted to do. By that, I mean, don't **let other people dictate the paradigms and details and expectations and deliverables of your dreams.**
- Just because someone's shared a meaningless quote image of Elon Musk telling you that "having a backup plan is committing to fail" doesn't mean it's true. **Embrace having multiple dreams to follow, and if one doesn't align or doesn't work, switch paths.**
- Remember, Steve Jobs' passion was music a long time before it was tech. You don't have to turn what you love into a lifelong dream. **You can, however, let other dreams influence the dreams you follow.**
- If your dream is to be a playwright, you will never be as rich as if your dream is to write software. A lot of people will say that kind of s**t. It doesn't matter — **the value of your dreams should not be measured in dollars alone.**

At the end of the day, you've got to be happy.

There's no point chasing or working for something that won't make you happy. Even if you're successful, that's going to lead to you dedicate your life to a sliver of the happiness you'd get if

you failed.

There's a certain kind of sadness that comes from convincing yourself that other folks' dreams are the ones you really want. That's a sadness you don't deserve. And you'll have nobody to blame but yourself.

I know that when I've chosen dreams that seemed "smart" by society or other people's standards, that's when I've been the most miserable. When I stopped making punk music because there wasn't money in it when I joined a startup, I hated hoping it would be worth a hundred million bucks when I went to law school thinking I could be a coked-out entertainment lawyer — I wouldn't say I liked it all.

Dreams are eminently worth chasing. In tiny ways — in huge ways — in every way. They're worth chasing for an hour a week if that's all you can manage. They're worth dedicating your life to. But you can't ask which you're meant to follow; you can only choose what aligns with who you are and what you want.

Dedicate one hour each day to your craft.

Writers write.

That's something I observe as a golden principle; you cannot call yourself a writer if you aren't prepared to sit down and do the work. It might be a part of your identity, it might be your most precious dream, but it is not your reality.

A writer is someone who makes the time to work on their craft. A writer is someone who prioritises it, who makes space for it, who builds it into her schedule. A writer is someone who makes sacrifices for who they want to be and the work they want to do.

The same principle is true for every other passion or pursuit. You aren't a painter if you don't paint. You aren't a programmer if you don't code. You aren't a maker if you don't make s**t. You're simply someone who is desperately clutching onto a piece of themselves that is either no longer real, or never was, to begin with.

I know that sounds harsh, but can you really tell me that it isn't true? Without doing the work, what evidence do you actually have to support your hypothesis about who you are?

I get it. You're time-poor.

Modern life is full-on, busy and exhausting — I believe you. Work is more time consuming and more exhausting than ever, with less meaning and less of a sense of purpose. By the time we make it through the day and reach a place of solace, we're worn thin, and we have so little left to give.

But if you want to pursue your craft, you have to look inwards and try to find the strength to do the work. Otherwise, you're fooling yourself. You're pretending to be something. You're playing emotional and mental dress up.

It comes down to a single rule.

Spend an hour a day working on your craft.

One hour.

No less, not necessarily more.

60 minutes — 60 consecutive minutes, not broken up throughout the day — where you take yourself somewhere in the house, in the garage, in a local wine bar, and do the thing.

Your output isn't important. There's no word count here—no set number of pages you need to read. Your project, whatever the

hell it is you're working on, doesn't need to be finished in any specific time frame. All that matters is building the practice and making it a priority. Making it something that you do because it deeply matters to you. Making it something that you don't, won't and can't compromise on. A goal can drive that hour, or it can be shaped by a few notes you scribble throughout the day, or you could sit the hell down and wing it. None of that is going to make the difference; it's doing the work that will shift you towards a bias for output, not overemphasising the output as the holy grail.

It's not about the quality. At all.

When Olga Khazan from The Atlantic interviewed Laura Vanderkam, author of *I Know How She Does It: How Successful Women Make the Most of Their Time*, her takeaway was that quality should never be the first goal.

“For writing projects specifically, her advice was to “write fast, edit slow.” She aims to write a chapter every week, and within that week, to write the bulk of the chapter on Monday and Tuesday. That means she’s often pumping out as many as 4,000 words a day. Then, Wednesday and Thursday are for editing, and Friday is a “catch-up” day, a net if you fall off your productivity high wire earlier. The key is to write a really crappy first draft, then take extra care in rewriting it.”

It's far easier to edit and improve on what's already there than it is to iterate on nothing. When you have 100 s**tty words, it doesn't take an impossible level of effort to cut it down and reshape it into 50 great ones. But without the starting point,

you're dead in the water.

If you look at anyone's creative output, you'll see the same utterly s**t level of quality when they started, when they worked on their first draft. Your ears don't know what the word awful means if you haven't heard Blink-182's Flyswatter demo, recorded on cassette tape on a boombox in a bedroom, almost a full decade before they sold 50,000,000 records worldwide.

So how do you make the time for it?

Like I said. It comes down to a degree of sacrifice.

We spend an average of 3 hours and 15 minutes on our phones every day.

We watch an average of 3.2 hours of Netflix before we hit the hay.

And we take 26% of our work home.

We're martyrs to priorities that don't matter or that have no business capturing as much of our time and our lives as we currently allow. We give it away freely, and we don't just do it at the expense of our creativity and passions; we do it at the expense of our families and loved ones.

Taking back just one hour of that time is an act of rebellion that places us in opposition to the automated subjugation of our tech, productivity and sedation religion.

There are easy ways to attack it. For example, when Netflix asks, “*Are you still watching?*” you are allowed to say you know what?

I’m not.

I’m going to write. Draw. Hack away at something. I’m going to take this prompt as an act of good faith and goodwill from a multi-billion dollar company that doesn’t give a flying f**k-in-a-sack and take a damn break.

For me, my practice happens in the mornings. I usually wake up before daylight and so before my family are stirring, and I write. I don’t waste time on social media; I don’t check and recheck my emails — I write. And drink copious amounts of coffee. And when my partner’s alarm goes off, I crawl into bed with them, and we get to chat about our day ahead and spend a moment together alone, sharing each other’s company.

My practice doesn’t take me away from my family. It takes me away from the time I would normally have spent doomscrolling through some app.

You don't have to be a productivity machine. But if you want to be a craftsman, you have to work on your craft.

This isn't a call to action for the side hustle economy. It's a call to action for making what matters to you a personal priority. If you can maintain your practice, if you can keep putting an hour a day into the work that matters, you will gather enough evidence to support your statements about who you are.

With the added benefit that you'll get to enjoy it. You're not passionate about making something because you've been told you are. You're passionate about it because it lights a fire in your heart and soul. If you give yourself an hour a day to experience that, it will have an immense impact on every other area of your life, where the love and care and energy you have to give will be nurtured by the creativity you have grown and raised inside.

“Grit is that ‘extra something’ that separates the most successful people from the rest. It’s the passion, perseverance, and stamina that we must channel to stick with our dreams until they become a reality.”

— Travis Bradberry

Nothing is impossible if you know how to start.

Do you know how to eat an elephant? One bite at a time. If you want your idea to eat the world, it's going to happen the same way.

I don't believe that anything is impossible if you know how to take the first step. Because that first step is where 8 people out of every 10 give up and throw in the towel.

When you look at the big goals, the big dreams that you want to reach, and you see them as a massive collection of Scary s**t That Must Be Done, you're never going to be able to do anything.

You'll be frozen with inactivity and uncertainty. That's what happens when you look at founding a blog, and you can't separate the first minuscule steps from your end goal of hundreds of thousands of published words.

That's what happens when you look at founding a startup, and

instead of seeing the day to day work, all you see is that huge valuation that you desperately want to chase.

That's what happens when you look at writing a book, and instead of seeing the plans that must be sketched out, all you see is an impossible-to-reach word count.

You're screwed in all of those examples if you don't know how to start. That's the truth of it.

But in all of those examples, if you have the first steps mapped out, achieving your goals becomes way more possible.

Don't work on building a \$1,000,000 a year company. Focus on turning it into a \$1,000 a month company. That's the first step. It's small and achievable and manageable, and it's not so impressive as to be horribly discouraging.

Your first steps matter. But what those first steps actually **are**, and whether they're the wrong or right steps, is not entirely important. The important part is knowing where to start, taking a chance, and learning from it.

Whatever you want to do, you need to define a simple first step that you know is achievable. Sit down with a piece of paper and brainstorm it. The first step needs to be something that you know is possible.

It could be as small as registering a domain name. It could be as big as signing your first client. It could be as crucial as writing your first line of code. It could be as difficult as cold calling 10

companies. It could be as simple as picking up a new lead for your guitar.

The first step is going to define all the steps that follow. Not by setting you on a path that can't be changed, but by setting yourself out as an entrepreneur or a creative who gets s**t done.

If you want to change the world, first work out what pants to put on when you do it. The steps that follow are going to be a s**t tonne easier.

Do you want to know how to build an audience? Read this.

Almost nobody cares about you. At least, not enough to do something about it. The default position of the general public, of all your audience and all your readers, is that they honestly don't give a damn about you. They might read your blog, and they might follow you on Twitter, but they're not going to want to be involved with you automatically.

To flip the *Field of Dreams* on its head, you build it, and the chances are, nobody will come. Nobody will magically land on your video, podcast, or blog and suddenly give a s**t. If that's all it took, I would've been internet famous when I was 13 and blogging on LiveJournal about how sensitive and beautiful my soul was and how much I hated my Dad.

There's nothing passive about what we do. When we make content, that's not the end of the road. We don't sign off on it like our work is done; we're only at the earliest stage of what we're about to do. We've still got to get out there and make

people care.

We do this by taking the initiative. We've got it into our head that our customers should always seek us out, but that's not going to work. There's so much stuff out there; how do you expect people to find your signal in all the noise? You've got to find them. You've got to go to wherever the hell they are and put yourself in front of them.

I want to talk about my own work. I don't publish a blog post and sit back, twiddling my thumbs, waiting for the readers to lumber over and get into it. No, that'd be a waste of a damn good post because no matter how many followers you have, you can't ever rely on them to keep reading your work.

When I publish, I get myself out there, and I start telling people about it. I have a list of around a couple hundred other writers, influencers, entrepreneurs that I've built up a rapport with, one on one, for years. People I emailed out of the blue back when I had around 12 followers on Medium, people I asked to read my work when nobody else in the world did.

Remember, I didn't start creating content with a huge audience built-in; I started with nothing, grew from nothing, and never stopped pushing ahead.

I'm not passive about it; I'm active. I don't wait for opportunities, I go out there, and I look for them. I look for readers, and I ask them to take the time to check out what I do, and if they like it, to keep reading, and I'll send them some more posts.

It's the same with everything else. Right now, I'm looking to head to the United States to do some speaking. In a perfect world, I'd love to be able to sit the hell back and wait for someone to send me an invitation, but the chances of that happening are pretty slim if nobody knows what I want.

So I'm building an old school spreadsheet full of people who run some conferences and meetups, and I'm going to 'em and asking them if they'd like to have me.

When people ask me how to build an audience, they really want to know how they get an audience to just come to them.

You don't. No audience just magically appears. Why do you think the biggest movies in the world have trailers, and ad campaigns, up to a year before they come out? They have to build the audience. Why do you think Apple has billboards in Sydney's Town Hall Station? People know Apple, but they still need to be drawn to the product.

In reality, this is the best advice I can give anyone who wants to build an audience, and it's the answer I always give when people email me about it. You have to identify your audience and actively work to get in front of them. There are some great ways to do this, but it starts with a profile.

You write up an entire profile of who your ideal customers/readers/viewers are. How old are they? Is their gender important? Is their sexuality important? Where are they? What channels do they use? When? Why? How?

This isn't something you can half-arse. You can't just say, oh, my perfect audience is me, because blah blah blah. If your perfect customer or reader is you, there's one of two problems: either you're not thinking hard enough, or you're building the wrong thing.

When you've built that profile, you have to find them. You can find your audience by looking at who people who fit that profile already follow, or you can research their demographics, or you can find one or two of them by searching interests on Twitter and seeing whether they and their friends match what you want.

You get your content in front of them by:

- Pushing yourself onto their radar by getting on a channel they already consume content from. IE — an appearance on a Vlog, a guest blog on Business Insider, whatever channel will match up with your ideal audience. You need to do your research, though; you can't just start throwing yourself at these channels and hoping for the best. Build a great body of content first, and have enough of it ready to go that you can impress anyone you approach and pitch.
- Serving them ads featuring your content. It staggers me how few people actually employ this strategy when they're starting as entrepreneurs. I think it's largely because

founders often balk at the idea of spending money. That's bulls**t. If you spend \$50 on Twitter ads and don't buy coffee for a month, you can get an awesome start on building an audience.

- Reaching out to them one-on-one, in order of priority according to how much influence they have online, and asking them to check you out. This is the best way forward, but it's also the most time consuming because it's not a matter of blasting a hundred people with a copy-pasted message; you have to actually establish a relationship with them and spend months literally building it up before you start asking them to watch, read, like or share.

If you can achieve those three things, you will grow and build an audience. If you can't, you will fail. Here's the tragic truth: not everyone will be able to build an audience; there's no sure-fire way to do it without the danger of failure or disaster.

But if you follow the steps above, you'll at least stand a chance.

There's one more point I want to make. When you measure your perfect audience, you have to understand that you also measure what success looks like. If your perfect audience is limited, you'll have a limited level of success. And there is nothing wrong with that.

For example, my favourite band of all time is Minor Threat. They broke up around 30 years ago, but they're still well known and pretty big in the underground punk/hardcore music scene. That means their records sell in the thousands. It is in no way means that they are less successful than Miley Cyrus. It means they

reached their perfect audience to the best extent that they ever could because their perfect audience is a whole lot smaller than Miley Cyrus'. And for the record, I love Miley Cyrus too. I think the indie approach and the dedicated niche audience is the better path.

If you're a literary writer, and your perfect audience is literary fans, the fact is that that's a limited audience. That's cool because it's a dedicated audience of people who care about incredible writing and want to read it. Appealing to them, and giving them the content they deserve, will probably mean that you're unlikely to find an audience of millions. But you don't need that.

Don't measure your success against the success of someone else with a different audience. Measure your success against how well you served content to the people who are in **your** audience.

Don't grow.

When you walk down any street with a touch of history, you'll see storefronts marked with dates. Est. 1856. Est. 1912.

There's a sobering clash of the modern way of viewing business success — immediate scale and ultimately acquisition — and the older idea of generational dynastic family businesses, carrying with them the histories and the DNA of their founders, employees and customers, dating back hundreds of years.

Storied companies that hold a long, rich past at their core and remain true to their original values and traditions are remarkable, not only for their ability to remain in business over staggering periods of time but also for their ability to adapt and change while remaining true to themselves and their purpose.

Founded in 1141 and run by the 55th generation of the Sudo family, Sudo Honke is one of these businesses. For 879 years, the oldest Sake brewery in Japan has thrived and survived through massive social, technological and economic change. It has

recently weathered the threat of radioactive contamination from the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant, with its products remaining pure to their original recipes.

Sudo Honke's president, Mr Gen-uemon Sudo, is conscious of the solidity and strength of their family's commitment.

“Fashion changes all the time, but it does not last. For us, we will continue to make our traditional products which have appealed to many throughout these years.”

Sudo Honke created something deeply rooted in their own culture, their local produce, and their identity. In doing so, they have developed a product that is loved and celebrated throughout the world. They have stayed true to who they are and what they do, eschewing the growth, scale and commoditization that has destroyed many young startups. There is a lesson here about the lasting opportunities of companies that are not designed to burn bright and burn out overnight.

Shifting the paradigm

When we talk about successful founders now, we're rarely talking about the people who have built long term businesses and made the successful transition from being a startup to being an established, healthy and thriving company. For the most part, we're talking about pump and dump high growth, media and VC darlings. The ideal is no longer the driven creator, whose dedication to her craft enabled her to design and sell a product. It's the founder as a personality who has sold their product, their company, and ultimately themselves.

We have developed a “growth as a good” mentality. There is nothing, in our modern viewpoint, that is noble, beautiful or memorable about things that are built to stand the test of time; if they’re found to be in the way of constant growth, they should be destroyed, whether they’re traditions, values or heritage sites. It’s a way of thinking that is both ancient and entirely new.

Paul Jarvis puts it quite succinctly;

“From an evolutionary point of view, it is explainable why we wanted to gather more and more: with more food, more water, more protection against predators, we may be less likely to die. But today, growth feeds our ego and social standing.”

Growth, where it no longer serves a purpose beyond the accumulation of more growth — in the form of investors’ returns, company coffers and the personal wealth of founders — is worshipped. And the cost is astronomical. For all intents and purposes, the endless growth goals of fossil fuel companies have doomed our entire planet. The endless growth of software and platform giants like Google and Facebook has destroyed lives and damaged democracy itself. On a smaller scale, growth as a god-value has turned promising founders into burned-out shells, chasing impossible goals and sacrificing their time and their lives and their health in the process.

Jurgen Appelo is the author of *Managing for Happiness*. His view is that growth unchecked becomes not only healthy it becomes destructive.

“Why do many business leaders want bigger organizations? If the

purpose of a company is merely growth, it is similar to cancer. Your business should try to be the best, not the biggest.”

There is a world outside of this paradigm. It is possible to build a million-dollar company with just a handful of people or even one founder. There are companies with growth scale, and exits are not the measures of success. They're companies with the founders' passion, values and ideas are kept at the heart of every decision and every action.

There are technology companies that live this paradigm as a reality.

They are built, grown and run at their founders' own pace. They have never IPO'd. They have never expressed any interest in doing so. They remain a profitable company with their sights set firmly on culture, capacity and purpose. The potential to become a billion-dollar company has always been there, but it's never become their goal, and as far as they're concerned, it never will.

In doing so, they have a low turnover rate, low overheads, high revenues, high profits and an ongoing pursuit of excellence that sets them apart from their competitors and peers by the sheer weight of their dedicated customer and employee focus. Growth happens. But growth is not the god-value. Growth happens, but growth does not require blood sacrifice.

As an angel investor, the prospect of companies avoiding hyper-growth doesn't scare me. I'm interested in teams, products

#DIY

and platforms that seek out revenue and profitability, and I'm interested in companies that can provide returns and gains organically, over an extended period of time, and through their longevity. I want to build relationships with founders with a solid foundation — relationships built to last, without conflicts of interest, while treating them as human beings.

Just show up.

I think we're all too focused on getting instant wins. We're too focused on breaking out. We expect every single piece of content we make to spread like wildfire, and we get discouraged when that doesn't happen. But it's such a nonsensical way to think about what we do. As makers, as writers, as creatives, we can't be chasing a flash in the pan, overnight success.

That's the kind of short term approach that never pays off. There is no way to predict that kind of viral success, and anyone who thinks they can reach for it in any repeatable format is going to be wrong. No algorithm can predict it.

In my experience making content, writing stories and producing work online, I have learned one thing. You can't count on much more than the power of consistency. You can't count on much more than just showing the hell up, day after day, and organically, faithfully building your audience.

Showing up gives you a chance...

When you're working on your craft, it's actually easier than you'd think to stagnate. It happens to the best of us, it happens to the worst of us, and it happens to everyone in between. Stagnation is the death of the artist. It means that your audience will get bored of you, get bored of how you create, and start to lose interest in your pursuit of mundanity.

And when all you're doing is trying to push for instant success, there is just no way you'll be able to avoid that stagnation because you won't be listening to your audience. You won't be listening to their passions and their needs. All you're going to do is watch the numbers. Watch them rise and fall, and sacrifice any creative spark you had to the data.

If you build that slow, that long term, that dedicated relationship with the people who actively give a s**t about what you do — that's something else. That's where you create a career of worth and a body of work that matters. The way to do that? Showing up. Showing up with your whole self, showing up with your values and beliefs, showing up with what makes you unique, but above all — showing up with consistency.

The consistency lets people understand what the hell you're about.

The first time someone interacts with you, they don't know who the hell you are. The first time someone consumes a piece of content that you've made, they don't know what you're about. You can't communicate that in one piece of work, no matter how good it is. It can't sum up the texture and the unique approach of how you make what you make.

By consistently working on creating regular content, you can provide context to your audience that takes them on a journey. Does that sound like bulls**t? It's the truth. Your role as a maker and a storyteller is to create a hero's journey that allows someone to forge an emotional link to your message, ideas, and creative brand. There is no way to do that if you can't maintain a steady output of work.

When I look at how I've been able to grow my network, to grow my audience, to write for publications from Wired to the SF Chronicle, the act of showing up regularly is what has always made the difference. If I hadn't done that, if I'd been laser-focused on trying to break through instead of build, there's no way I could be where I am today.

The key to building an audience is showing up. Showing up will give you the foundation you need to have a career and a craft. Anything else is never going to work.

Make them pay what you're worth

I don't discount myself. I don't give myself away for free. I know my value, and that's what I ask for.

People like to ask how much they should charge for their startup, their record or their book, or their services. Software subscriptions, content, ad-networks, it's all the same. Concerns about settling on pricing structures are universal.

In general, founders and entrepreneurs and professionals do not have clear methodologies for coming up with pricing. This is common, and it comes up a lot.

For most, it's either a voodoo equation involving doubling your living expenses and subtracting a percentage, or it's based purely on what everyone else is doing — every founder and her dog has a pricing option that starts at \$9.90 per month. It's not based on data analysis.

The cost of what you do is a panic point. Nobody has enough

faith in themselves to charge what they're worth or in their customers to pay for what they use. The result is businesses and freelancers that cannot maintain a healthy margin.

In all likelihood, you are not running a charity. You are attempting to reach profitability, turn a profit right now, or find a way to build the value of your startup for your investors to have a return on the capital.

What this means is that you need to take your margins seriously and, to do so, take your pricing seriously. There are 2 considerations I want to talk about here.

What do you have the guts for?

Make no mistake, the most important part of your pricing is guts. Pure guts. That's what it takes to stand in front of a customer and state your fees and price schedule without flinching, without adding caveats and without hinting that you'll take any price they offer you out of sheer desperation.

It takes guts to set out your prices and stand by them. Most younger freelancers and founders do not have those guts. They will always present their prices as a wish-list, that they are completely ready to reduce and squeeze.

I can't tell you to harden up and put your game face on. That's not a positive piece of advice, and you're not going to listen to it. What you need to do is work out what price point you can set forward and stick with.

Once you have that line, you have the first price that you can offer. And you also have a base, a starting position from which you can gradually increase. If you know you'll be able to stand by one price point, you can add experience, features or simply the passage of time and push it up.

What do your customers expect?

Your customers already have a limit to what they're willing to pay. It's a limit that's probably nothing to do with the value of your service or product and is based purely on their prior experience. They're paying \$11.99 a month for Spotify, and they're paying \$11.99 a month for Apple Music, and therefore there is no way they're paying \$19.99 a month for Tidal. Thanks for playing.

The same applies to freelancers. Look at freelance writers. How much should an article be worth? Probably a lot more than is being paid out on the gig and marketplace sites. But people are used to paying a certain amount (it's low and depressing) and will likely balk at paying more.

So what do you do? You have three options here.

You meet their expectations, putting yourself on even footing with your competition.

You undercut their expectations, taking advantage of your competition.

You let your pricing exceed their expectations to the absolute

limit of what they'll stand for and justify it with a clear value proposition.

The first option is fine. As long as you know the expectations, it's a simple and easy way to price yourself or your startup. And fine is a solid level. **As the saying goes, please put it in front of wine or dining, and you've really got something.**

The second option is only good if you can afford it. You might not have heard of Pets.com. It would help if you researched them. When people joke about losing money on every sale and making it up on volume, Pets.com is the punchline. In itself, the idea of pricing low enough to gain traction is great, and Amazon proves that it can work. But it's a risky move.

You have to know that your lower prices are not going to drive you out of business. They're either allowing for a healthy margin, or you're following Amazon's path of losing money but having enough cash to sustain it.

The third option is my personal favourite. One of my advisors, a guy who has been building, helping and investing in businesses for longer than I've been alive once, told me that it's easy to make more money than your competitor. You charge more.

The trick is working out what limit you can push your customers to and what value you can add to make that limit worthwhile. Tidal blew it because they smashed right past the limit, and their value was tough to see. Or perhaps, non-existent.

Don't be like Tidal. I think that's good advice for everyone...

Everyone wants something for free.

Everyone wants you to give them your labour and your value for free.

They'll offer you exposure, or they'll offer you a chance to build your portfolio, and none of it means jack. They devalue the years — literally, years — you've spent growing and honing and building your skills, through sheer blood, and sweat and tears, by trying to barter it out of you for nothing.

And when you say no? When you tell them you can't afford to work for free because you still have to pay for your own rent, your own bills and your own food out of **somewhere** — they act like you're the entitled one. They act like you're the asshole.

Their message is this. “If you don't help me for free, you're a bad person.”

And their attitude is, if we don't drop everything we're doing to make everyone's projects our personal business and top priority without charging a dime, then we're frauds.

It's pretty toxic, but unfortunately — it's something I'm used to.

That is the opposite of collaborating. It's demanding labour.

Some folks will always try to get something for free if they can.

They try to get something without offering even a fraction of its

value in return.

And if you freelance, if you're a writer or a creative of any kind, or if you're a small startup trying to gain your first ground, you're going to be confronted with this kind of attitude over and over again. As a writer, it happens all the time. So many publications want me to write for free.

One publishing company approached me recently and offered me a book deal if I agreed to \$0 upfront and \$0 on every book until they'd reached x amount of sales, at which point I'd get 10%. It's ignominious to the point of being insulting. And it happens in all the work I do. I've had startup founders harass me via my emails because I wouldn't work for free at my advertising studio and had the audacity to insist that my award-winning work has real-world value.

It's all exhausting, and it can be almost gaslighting to experience.

You almost feel guilty when you ask people for money, and they come up with a creative way of telling you to piss up a flag pole.

But that guilt has been carefully designed by these folks to keep you working for free for as long as possible.

Here's how to break out of that guilt.

I have a finite number of hours, minutes and seconds left to be alive.

The average life expectancy here in Australia is 82 years, so let's say I've got another 50 or so years left on this planet if the current climate crisis doesn't cut it short by an even more drastic number.

So that's around 480,000 hours.

Sounds like a lot, right?

Wrong.

Let's say I am fortunate enough to shove my work into its box and spend 8 hours a night sleeping. That's 160,000 hours gone, and I'm down to 320,000.

By the time I go on to cut out weekends, holidays, time spent with my loved ones, time spent working on my own business, time spent educating myself, building my skills, writing my blog, writing and reading books, touring, speaking, filling out taxes, getting sick and recovering and squeezing out a little time here and there to watch TV...

...how much time do you think I'll have left?

Hint: nowhere near 480,000 hours.

Because my time is already running out down here on earth, here's my response when people want my work without paying for it:

"If I sacrifice a bunch of hours to your project for free, that's time I

can never get back, time is taken from a constantly running out well, and time that my family will now never have with me. I hope you understand why I can't do that."

Business is business. I keep it that way.

I do work for free. For the people who I mentor, for some non-profits and some charities. For trans and queer people who need a hand, or a moment of my time, or someone to talk to. For friends and wonderful humans. For founders and creatives and writers to whom I give away office hours.

But all of this is giving time away on my terms—nobody else's.

I don't do commercial work for anything, and I won't do commercial work out of the goodness of my heart or for any other bulls**t that keeps me from getting paid the money I deserve.

It doesn't have to be money.

I have amazing sponsorships in place with incredible companies who have a huge commitment to creatives and provide me with software, resources, the occasional notebook and one or two delightful mascaras.

That's better than money. It's priceless. It's support.

Those folks understand what it means to exchange value for value. That's why we get along so damn well. They understand the give and take.

I'm upfront about needing that.

I don't mess around. I don't f**k around.

If you're emailing me on a laptop or a smartphone that you use for your business, guess what?

I'm pretty sure you didn't rock up to Apple and promise them exposure.

They would have laughed you out of there.

And if you really think what I do has so little value that you won't pay for it, why on earth would you think it would help your business in any way?

It's clearly not worth it. How can it have a positive impact?

Here's the last point. If you are serious about your business, you won't be giving everything away for free.

So if you want to improve your business, why would you listen to the advice of someone who doesn't charge you for it?

Wouldn't that mean they aren't serious about their business?

In the end, people who want free s**t haven't thought about any of this.

They haven't. All they've done is selfishly ask themselves how they can get what they want without paying for it.

Because their work matters more than your work or your career.

That's an unacceptable attitude, and it violates my principle of how to conduct myself — acting ethically and responsibly to get the best outcome for me without harming or disadvantaging others.

I know some people are going to have a whinge about this one.

They'll complain that they are the exception and people should work for free for them because their idea will change the world because they'll pay me later. After all, they don't have the budget, but they somehow “deserve” it.

And to those people — as well as the international corporation who took 18 months to pay an invoice under \$5,000, the startups who mysteriously disappeared when the final invoice arrived, the law firm who wanted a second opinion on my writing quote when I wouldn't do it for the exposure and everyone else who doesn't respect honest working people, freelancers, small business owners, writers, designers and developers —

*F**k you.*

Pay us.

Tell people what you want. Then let
them help you.

There is a long-running tradition that we don't tell people what we really want. Instead of walking up to the gatekeepers in our lives and saying that we would like them to give us the opportunities we seek, we prefer to avoid the topic. To not put our hands up. To act like we don't think we deserve or should have something.

That's not healthy.

Frankly? Nobody is going to give you points for being self-deprecating and letting others walk in front of you. That's not how life works. Professionally and personally, that's not how life works.

Opportunities go to those who want them.

If you had created a software product, you wouldn't sit back and wait for the customer to just come right to you and expect that they'll somehow decide to give you business. The same is true of anything else; you have to be actively trying to persuade people to give you the opportunities you want. It's called sales, and it's not a dirty word; it's a necessary activity.

There are all sorts of perceptions that people have around where you and your career is going and what you want out of life. People are going to make judgement calls based on those perceptions. People are going to limit and pigeonhole you based on those perceptions. The best possible way to change that is to actively tell people what you are looking for and make sure they know it.

There is something incredibly empowering about saying what you want out loud and articulating it clearly. When I first started developing the habit of taking control and stating my wants, I started feeling more respect for them, taking them more seriously myself. I was worried that I would feel cheapened by doing that, but instead, I have just grown into a sense of engaged capability.

In my experience? Good people will always want to help.

It's only when you start to actually articulate what you want that you are really able to define it for yourself. To turn it into a tangible statement of want, rather than a vague concept. And once you have that defined, it's like having your dreams defined; you'll be able to work towards achieving and fulfilling them.

The fact is that you are going to get left behind and forgotten if you spend your time being patient and waiting for recognition instead of asking for it. That way lies redundancy and outplacement. The people who are wanting in secret will always be wanting and unfulfilled.

Wherever you want to be — consider that you might get there faster if other people can help you out and let go of your pride and ask for it. The great thing about people, the amazing thing about people, is that they love to help each other.

There are some real assholes out there who don't want to, but there's a lot more who are happy to be useful and are willing to give other human beings a leg up.

So let them.

It only looks perfect to you.

I'm focused so much on working with startups and firms, and working in tech marketing and attempting to start a career as a writer that all I can see are the problems—the cracks.

To me? It feels like my work is wildly inconsistent, my writing is total s**t, my marketing practices are badly thought out and managed, and my Dad was right about my lack of potential.

To anyone else, it might not seem like that. You might see a blog post every day and an evolving brand or a speaking engagement and think it's all running smoothly. You can't see the anxiety.

You can't see me reading an article about a new software startup and suddenly losing all faith in my professional services business and frantically texting my long-suffering girlfriend about how much of a mistake my entire life is.

You can't see me sitting on the floor, in the corner of my workspace, struggling with a panic attack.

Whether you're running a business, writing a blog or trying to build a freelance creative career, you are always going to feel like your life is in chaos. You will feel like the whole thing is held together with duct tape, band-aids and a few well-placed staples.

This is the way everyone feels. Please believe that, no matter how successful you've been, every minor problem or small issue or inconsistency is always magnified at a thousand until it turns into Godzilla. And you lie awake at night, with a huge mutant lizard rampaging through your head.

It's because you're right there in the trenches. You're slinging s**t every day trying to make it work, so to you, every little aspect of your project seems so much bigger, so much more important. Every imperfection almost screams at you.

But then you look at everyone else. The other entrepreneurs, whose image looks so perfect. The writers with an Instagram feed full of tastefully posed photos of manuscripts and whiskey. The "freedom business" bulls**tters, sunning it on a beach in Fiji with a laptop and a coconut.

And it looks perfect, doesn't it? Does it look like they've got everything under control? Surely, they're running a smoothly operating, well-oiled machine?

No way. Don't even think that for a moment. They are operating on the same level of blind, clutching, stressed out panic as you are. You can't see it, but it's there.

I don't want to depress you. Or convince you that trying to make it, trying to start s**t, trying to build something is too scary to be worthwhile. That's not true. What I want to say is this. You can't hold yourself to a standard that doesn't exist.

You're never going to have a business or a project or a life that feels as perfect as everyone else's looks. It's not possible. Their world is as hellish and tough as yours, even if it doesn't seem that way from the outside. But this is a good thing.

It means that when you're panicking, stressing, and feeling overcome with self-doubt, you're not doing any worse than the rest of us. You're not alone in feeling that way. It's completely normal. You're one of us, and we get it. We're not #lovinglife or feeling #blessed. It may seem that way, but it's not the case.

You don't have to be a machine. You don't have to think positive. You don't have to "just believe and breathe." That's all the advice you'll get when you tell people how much s**t is on your plate. But you don't have to listen to it.

Whatever you make? Go for simplicity.

You're wrong if you think that making something complicated makes it better. You're wrong if you think that longer documents are more insightful.

You're wrong (and elitist) if you think using complicated language makes you smarter.

You're wrong if you think simplicity is cheap and cheerful.

I know so many people and have met so many people who have this misguided idea that it has to be big, complicated, long, and full of a lot of 10 dollar words for something to be of value.

They'll never produce anything simple - because to them, that's not worth anything.

You've probably experienced this a lot. You've heard politicians do it, for sure. They try and obscure their meaning behind so much crap and so many fancy phrases that they miss all

simplicity.

You've heard companies do it too. You've heard their meaning dissolve into technobabble, and corporate/marketing speak, where there's always a special word or phrase that sounds fancy and positive but really just means Screw You.

And if you're creative, you've done it yourself. Simple just seems cheap to some creatives, so they try and add value through complications. Writers think like this all the time.

They'll pad out their work with a bunch of complicated words from a Goddamn thesaurus in the hope of making themselves sound smarter. They'll never say in 500 words what they could say in 5,000.

Entrepreneurs and tech folks do it too. Their pitches are a prime example of it. They'll struggle to explain in simple terms just what it is they do, and they'll use buzzwords and phrases and old paradigms and dumb comparisons because they're not ready to stand by the simplicity of what they want to do.

A few years ago, I was asked to write a marketing plan for a major corporation. When my first draft came back, the response was that the strategy was great, the steps were there, and the plan was fantastic — but it needed to be longer.

There wasn't anything missing; it wasn't half baked — they just wanted more pages.

The extra length and extra complication could not possibly give

it more weight (beyond the physical weight gleaned from adding more paper).

When it was signed off with high praise, the final plan had no changes to the existing content. It just had 30 pages of bibliography and appendix stapled to the back. What a pointless exercise!

Simple is beautiful, even if only because it can be understood. Simple is beautiful because it can express what you're trying to do, say, and show without adding a lot of worthless frills to it.

Simple is beautiful because simple allows you to communicate.

I think I learned this from my struggle with a speech problem. When I was a kid, nobody could understand a thing I said to them.

Getting a sentence out was immensely difficult, and I'd stumble over every word and turn incoherent. My best chance at having anyone grasp what I was trying to say was to say it simply. Keep my sentences short, to the point, and free of any too big, flowery or complex words. I learned that communicating simply was the only way I had to make sure the people around me could understand me. That's carried through in my writing, too. I try not to fool around and waste time. I value the simplicity of what I do over everything else.

And I don't see it as lacking value just because I'm not writing 1,000-word posts. I also don't see what I do as worthless, just because I deal with some pretty simple concepts about living

and working creatively. Again, simple is beautiful.

There's more to it than being understood, of course. Making your work simply means you can't tiptoe around difficult ideas or tough talk.

There's nothing flowery to hide behind, so you have no option but to deal with the basics.

And making your simple means, you can't pull the wool over your audience's eyes and fool them into believing there's a substance where there isn't.

There are always people who are going to disagree with this. They'll have their reasons, and some of them I respect.

But I honestly believe you can create incredible prose and brilliant non-fiction writing, and incredible products, and successful marketing plans by making them simple by not being self-indulgent.

I'm a cruel editor, as anyone I've worked with can attest. I look at every sentence, and I ask what its purpose is. If the writer can't come back with a good reason, I take a red pen to it. I'm the same as an entrepreneur. I don't like "features"; I like functions. I don't see the point of a TV in a fridge, for example.

I do the same thing to my own work. My posts normally range from 1500–2000 words before I hack them down.

Before I take each piece and part of the puzzle and question it

ruthlessly, I don't want to waste my readers' time or obscure what I'm trying to get out.

I think you can always simplify what you're trying to say, or build, or do — if you're mindful enough of its true meaning and purpose, and you're not too caught up in it. I'm often reminded of a quote from Samuel Johnson:

“I would say what an old tutor of a college said to one of his pupils: Read over your compositions, and where ever you meet with a passage which you think is particularly fine, strike it out.”

That's not the worst advice ever. Make it simple. Cut the crap. Remove the frills. Let your meaning shine through.

No matter what you do, someone will hate you.

No matter what you do, someone will hate you. Some people hate the Beatles. Some people suck.

I don't waste my time worrying about the people who don't like me. That's not a good way to use up any of the 60 seconds in any of the 60 minutes in any of the 24 hours in any day. Worrying about why people don't like me, don't like my work, don't like the way I talk and hate the way I present myself is an intensely unproductive activity.

I've learned that if you look hard enough (and sometimes, you don't have to look hard at all), you can find someone who hates almost anything. You could build the greatest supercomputer known to humanity, make it pocket-sized, use the profits to solve hunger and found an organisation working to cure cancer, and someone on Twitter will say, ***"f**k that bitch LULZ."***

Take Gary Vaynerchuk. It's no secret that a lot of people don't

like him. They're often pretty vocal about it. I've seen people on Twitter call him out over perceived slights, the fact that they don't like how he promotes himself, or just because there's something about him that irks them.

There are articles and blog posts about it, and they're from intelligent people who have decided that they've got a bone to pick with Gary Vee. I'm sure he's aware of a lot of this material. But I'm not sure he really gives a s**t. He's working on a pretty clear mission, some pretty cool businesses and a personal brand that millions of people find hugely inspiring, including me. You'll never see him wringing his hands over some guy on the internet who hates him because he understands the cardinal rule of creating anything.

No matter how great a company, a product, a book, a film or a person is, some asshole on the internet will hate 'em.

People will hate anything, won't they? There doesn't have to be a rhyme or a reason; they have a knee-jerk reaction and decide that whatever it is, they're against it.

People online hate Beethoven, Taylor Swift, Diana Ross, Tim Cook and Gandhi. That hatred doesn't amount to any tangible reason why anyone on that list sucks. All it amounts to is the raging opinion of a bunch of people behind a keyboard.

If you get caught up in the absolute maelstrom of hate, the only person who's really going to drown in it is yourself. I've said it before, and I'll repeat it. Even if you win a s**t fight, you still

end up covered in s**t.

Whatever you do, wherever you go, however you conduct yourself and the level of success you attain, some asshole will hate you. It might not happen today, it might not happen tomorrow, but I can guarantee you — it will happen. One of these days, you'll wake up and check your emails or your Twitter or blog and find out that someone has taken the time to express in writing just what they think of you.

When that happens, you have to remember that it doesn't mean anything. It doesn't matter; it's unimportant, it's utterly trivial. The first time it happened to me, some of my friends told me that it meant I was successful. I don't think that's true. All it means is I'd pressed someone's button. You have to ignore the hatred, largely because the only outcome, if you don't, is that you'll be hooked into a trap. You can waste your life away trying to change someone's mind or defend yourself and never gain an inch of ground.

That rule I mentioned — I have it written on a post-it note on my monitor. I read it multiple times a day. No matter how great a company, a product, a book, a film or a person is, some asshole on the internet will hate 'em.

So, f**k 'em.

People are going to laugh at your dreams

But you can't let their opinions dictate your decisions.

I have a paralyzing fear of failure. I guess that makes me pretty normal. For most people, that fear stops them from getting out there and doing the things they are most passionate about. Unfortunately, the fear of failure isn't a fear of not succeeding—most of the time, what we're actually scared to hell about is what everyone else thinks. And whether or not they're going to laugh at us.

If you try and something, and fail, and flame out, you're probably worried that everyone will know you lost. They'll see you crash and burn, and they'll lose faith in you. Mock you. Decide that you aren't worthy of their respect.

If you ever want to get anywhere, if you want to do anything, accomplish anything, you will need to open yourself up to a whole lot of ridicule. And that ridicule will come flooding in. You'll face it every day. It will come from people you've never met, with random Anime characters in their Twitter pic, and it will come from people you respect and look up to.

When I first started in business, I had a lot of people making fun of me. As we call it in Australia, taking the mickey. I was working full time at McDonald's, and the other crew thought I was an idiot for leaving a safe job to strike out on my own, with no guarantee that I'd have enough money to eat.

It wasn't enough for them that I knew becoming an entrepreneur was what I wanted to do. It wasn't enough that I had a dream I needed to follow. To them, putting myself out there was stupid.

And they were going to wait for the failure, for the sweet taste of “I told you so.”

I went blasting out of there with all the force of their derision driving me like high powered rocket fuel. I shot for the stars, and I gave it everything I had, driven by the need to prove them wrong. To prove everyone wrong. Looking back, I know that I went on to make so many decisions based purely on my need to prove myself, to show the world that I was right. Some of those decisions turned out okay, but some of them were a total disaster. But I regret almost all of them because I didn't make those choices for myself. I made them for the people I was trying to leave behind.

If I could go back, I would have been looking at what I needed to do and wanted to do without trying to make a scene and put myself in the spotlight to try and demonstrate my worth. That was a waste of my time. It led to a disaster in my personal life, and most of the money I made drying up.

These days, I've learned the hard way that what the rest of the world thinks doesn't matter too much. If they're laughing at me, I can laugh with them. It still happens all the time. That entire experience has been a pretty integral part of my journey, from flipping burgers to playing shows in a Kings Cross nightclub to investing in startups. When you're building a DIY career, you will have to go through this process yourself. You'll have to face up to the stares and the sighs and the people who are going to point a finger and laugh. Listening to me won't teach you a lesson that will stick with you forever — I know, because you're probably a lot like me. Reading this won't stop you from having

#DIY

to slog your own way through the crap. You're going to have to find your own way from here to there.

But I was hoping you could take one thing away from this. When people laugh, it doesn't mean a thing. It doesn't mean you're wrong, and it doesn't mean you're right. It only says something about them.

The hard truth.

We've all had to hone in on some hard truths and accept our creativity. About our craft. About what we make and build.

When you're a creative, unless you're lucky enough to have a book deal or a paid publishing gig, you don't have much accountability. It's very privileged freedom, but it's the freedom we pay for.

It means that the world will keep spinning most of the time if you drop off the planet and never finish another piece of work. ***And it also means that you are the only one who can make you finish anything. And you can't finish if you can't face the hard truths and learn to live with them and work inside their limitations.***

Some people get rich building things. But that's not the point.

There's no end of examples of startup founders and rock stars and authors who have made absolute bank and never have to work another day in their lives. I wish I were one of them, believe me. I am absolutely not, and I am unlikely ever to be. I'm directionally okay with that because my goal remains the same, always. To make and build good things that I love on my terms. It's that simple.

By all means, plan to make money. Work to make money. Capitalize financially on whatever success you have.

But if you want to build or create something of honesty and integrity, whether that's a tech platform or an album of Japanese noise music, you have to be able to put aside that focus on money for money's sake.

You are going to be misunderstood. It doesn't matter.

We all want people to understand us, and understand our work, and understand what drives us. On some levels, the act of building something is an attempt to communicate in our own language. That could be an app, a line of code, or a book.

But nobody speaks that same language as you. And people are going to miss the point, read between the lines and add their own opinion and interpretations to whatever you make.

It's going to get frustrating, and you're going to want to scream.

You might even feel persecuted when people get the wrong end of the rope and try to hang you with it. Does it matter? No way. All that matters is that you listen to what drives you, creating what needs to be created.

Having a job is a learning experience, not an obstacle.

Businesses can take a while to catch on, apps aren't always an instant hit, and I've got news for the writers out there — even Kim Kardashian can't sell more than 30,000 copies of a book. Most of us won't be able to make a living off what we build right away. That's where having a job comes in.

When all you want to do is work on your own project and create something that matters, it's frustrating to set it aside every day and focus on the work that will make you money. The work that will pay the bills. The office job with the business suit or the 9-hour shift in a uniform you hate wearing.

But I challenge anyone to show me a job from which you can't learn something. I flipped burgers at McDonald's for 5 years when all I wanted to do was paint skateboards, code websites and tour with a succession of s**tty bands. It taught me how to manage people, manage my time, serve customers, and surprise and delight people when they don't expect it.

Your best work, the work you love, could go unrecognized...

The best thing I have ever written, in my honest opinion, is a 5-page short story about my experiences playing punk rock and hanging out with my best friends before life drove us apart. I love it, and I'm proud of it. Now and then, when I read through it, I honestly feel like I haven't achieved the same raw emotion in anything I've created since.

Unfortunately, everyone I have shown it to can't stand that piece of writing. They just can't.

Part of being able to create anything at all (and you can create anything at all) is accepting that what resonates with you could be hated by everyone else.

When John Romero made the video game Daikatana, he created the game that he dreamed of playing. Almost everyone hated it. I don't know how he feels about it now or if he's still as proud of it as he was when he first made it, but I do know that it was widely reviled.

...and your worst work could be your legacy

There's a flip-side to that. The work you always felt let you down, the pieces and the concepts and companies that never quite lived up to your dreams could be what you are remembered for. Do you want to know why?

You don't get to control anyone's perception of your work—just

your own.

Your craft needs to matter to you. Your quality needs to matter to you. Making beautiful things needs to matter, even if you fail from time to time, even if you don't quite match up to your own vision. That's why we do this. We do this to create and craft wonderful work that we believe in.

That's what matters the most.



About the Author

Joan Westenberg is an award-winning Australian PR director, contemporary writer, angel investor and creative. Joan is the founder and CEO of PR and communications firm [Studio Self](#). Her approach to messaging, communication and semiotics has built her reputation as a writer, and she has been named as one of the leading startup voices in Australia by SmartCompany.

Her writing has appeared in The SF Chronicle, Wired, The AFR, The Observer, ABC, Junkee, SBS, Crikey and over 40+ publications. Her regular work can be found on [Pizza Party](#), sharing notes on growing as a creative, a founder, an investor and a human being.

You can connect with me on:

 <https://www.joanwestenberg.com>

 <https://twitter.com/joanwestenberg>

Subscribe to my newsletter:

✉ <https://pizzaparty.substack.com>

